

THE BLESSINGS OF PROPERLY APPLIED MULTI-SITE CHURCH PLANTING IN THE  
WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

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## **Abstract**

In the last decade, the multi-site church planting model has become a major factor in the way American churches have chosen to expand their reach into the community. Many non-denominational and Evangelical churches have referred to multi-site church planting as “the new normal” or as a “revolution,” because of the model’s impact, wide range implementation, and numerical attendance success. However, in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the model has found little implementation. Little is known or has been experienced with the multi-site model.

In a constantly shifting church landscape, it is important to analyze the practicality of any church model in order to find the best ways, according to ministry context and congregational factors, to carry out the Great Commission. After researching other denominations’ usage of multi-site and interviewing WELS pastors and synod leaders, it became apparent that there are a number of inherent blessings and challenges that accompany the multi-site model. The goal of this thesis is to analyze the model’s practicality and replication possibilities in the WELS, comparing the blessings with the challenges, and measuring the multi-site church planting model with the clear truths of Scripture.

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## **Introduction**

When a company posts huge numbers in weekly sales, people notice. When that same company reports astronomical numbers in their monthly income, people wonder what that company is doing better than its competition. When that company's value rises to the top of the stock market, other companies look to emulate and replicate that successful company's business model. Certainly, numbers and statistics are important factors in society. The company that makes the most money is envied and emulated. The university which boasts the highest number of immediately hired graduates draws a high number of applicants. Churches which boast the highest number of people in attendance every weekend get books written about the way they "do church."

However, numbers are not the only criteria society uses to measure success. There are plenty of small businesses, schools, and churches that are deemed successful because they accomplish the goals and vision which they have mapped out for themselves, even if their numbers are not at the top of the charts. Yet, the fact remains. Large numbers draw large amounts of attention and analysis.

The Christian church today is no exception. When a church is able to reach tens of thousands of people with their message each and every weekend, people notice. Such drastic numbers cause analysts and pastors alike to ask, "How do they do it?" "What is their secret?" For decades, that distinction belonged to the megachurch movement; vast stadiums or sanctuaries packed to the rafters every Sunday with thousands of disciples eager to hear the biggest names in American churches preach: Joel Osteen, Andy Stanley, Ed Young, Rick Warren. However, the general consensus in much of Christianity is that the paradigm is shifting away from the megachurch movement and onto the multi-site movement.

A few facts from a 2010 Leadership Network survey support this perceived paradigm shift. According to the study, multi-site churches now outnumber megachurches. Multi-sites reach more people and mobilize more volunteers. The average weekend attendance of a multi-site church is 1,300 worshipers. Multi-site campuses have a ninety percent success rate in

remaining open.<sup>1</sup> These numbers point to success, at least in the amount of people these multi-site churches are able to reach with their message. For example, Seacoast Church, a large multi-site interdenominational church whose original site is in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, has a weekly worship attendance of 10,000 people across their thirteen campuses.

During my vicar year in Summerville, South Carolina, I was introduced to the concept of multi-site churches. I looked at Seacoast's model and thought, "What about their church draws so many people? What can we in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod replicate and emulate from this model of church planting? Would it work in our synod?" These questions led me to pursue further research on the multi-site church planting model as it is implemented by non-denominational, Evangelical, and Baptist church bodies, and how the model has been implemented already among some WELS congregations.

As I read books describing the positives of the multi-site movement, it became apparent that many consider multi-site to be a revolution in the church and the way church planting is done. Geoff Surratt, one of the founding pastors of Seacoast Church says, "We believe the multi-site church movement is revolutionary. The concept of having church in more than one location isn't new or revolutionary; the roots of multi-site go back to the church of Acts. But rather, the measure of a revolution is its impact, not its origins."<sup>2</sup>

Based on numbers alone, it is apparent that the multi-site church movement is having a large impact around the world. The question we need to wrestle with as a church body is whether we can have a similar impact by implementing and replicating a multi-site church planting model in our synod. Are there certain parts of the model which can and should be replicated? Are there elements of the multi-site model that must be avoided at all costs?

Many people would put an asterisk next to those weekly attendance numbers because the message being preached in many multi-site churches is a feel good message that tailors to people's desire to live for right now, rather than focusing their eyes on eternity with Christ;

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches and Those Who Want to Be* (Scottsdale, AZ: MultiSite Solutions, 2011), Kindle e-book. Loc 51

<sup>2</sup> Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 17.

preaching social gospel rather than the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the eyes of some, the numbers are huge because multi-site pastors are feeding their congregants candy rather than meat. This is, of course, a stereotype which can only be substantiated with a study of the sermons that multi-site pastors are preaching. While this might be the case in some multi-site churches, we can't stereotype all multi-site churches this way. Certainly, there are also many churches which do not implement multi-site ministry which can also be accused of preaching such feel good messages. When I asked Pastor Rick Johnson<sup>3</sup> what he thought the main factors were which allow many multi-site congregations to achieve such vast numerical success, he pointed out,

It seems that many evangelical and non-denom churches have "success" apart from the multi-site model too. The largest churches in my area are evangelical or non-denom. If you are asking in a backhand kind of way why Lutherans don't seem to have the same outward success, I think it is because Lutheran theology, while biblically correct, is counter-intuitive. We constantly struggle against the "opinio legis"<sup>4</sup> in people. Evangelical and non-denoms play to a form of the opinio legis with decision theology.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, we can never change our doctrines or teachings which are drawn from the inerrant words of Scripture to scratch the "itching ears" of people in today's society (2 Timothy 4:3-4). And certainly, those weekly attendance numbers are padded by people who desire only a feel-good, law-free message. But I imagine that not all of those ten thousand people are there for that reason. Some of those ten thousand people are yearning and seeking the truth of law and gospel taken directly from Scripture. So imagine the impact the Holy Spirit could have if the combined campuses of a WELS multi-site congregation could draw even half that amount. Five thousand people could be impacted with the power of law and gospel every week, just in one small geographic region of the country. Five thousand people's faith could grow and be strengthened by the Holy Spirit through exposure to the efficacious means of grace.

It is clear that there are many blessings and challenges associated with the multi-site model, as there are in any form of church planting. Do the blessings outweigh the challenges? That question must be determined. As I interviewed a number of WELS officials and pastors

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<sup>3</sup> Pastor of multi-site WELS congregation-- Crown of Life, Corona, CA

<sup>4</sup> "The opinion of the law" the inclination of the inborn sinful nature which leads people to believe they can do something to contribute to their own salvation.

<sup>5</sup> Rick Johnson, e-mail interview by author, November 26, 2013.

who have a working knowledge of multi-site, who are currently implementing multi-site, or who are planning to in the future, it was clear that our synod's knowledge and understanding of the model is still a work in progress. Therefore, it is important to study this method; to evaluate its effectiveness, efficiency, and applicability for wide range usage in our church body.

Based on my interviews and research, I have come to the conclusion that a properly applied<sup>6</sup> multi-site church planting model can and should find wide range implementation in WELS, as a complement and supplement to the normal church planting and daughtering of congregations which are currently being used in our synod. I believe the potential blessings which God will shower upon his church through the use of this model are many; far too many to leave off our radar simply because this model has not found wide range implementation in our synod previously, or because of heterodox implementation.

In 2006, Pastor Geoff Surratt predicted that within the next few years, thirty thousand American churches would be implementing multi-site.<sup>7</sup> Since then, the multi-site model has continued to grow and find acceptance across the country, including some WELS congregations. The question going forward is whether multi-site will remain a niche ministry used only in certain demographic regions? Or whether it will find wide range implementation across the country in WELS?

### **Literature Review**

While the amount of literature available concerning multi-site church planting is somewhat expansive and growing rapidly every day as the model gains steam and traction in churches around the world, most of the literature comes from pastors or church growth experts who are very complimentary of the model, and think it is the new revolution in the way American churches will expand into the communities. This is both a positive and a negative in many aspects. Since our synod does not have much experience in the workings and intricacies of multi-site church planting, it is important to have literature written by pastors and members of other denominations who have experienced more of the ins and outs of the model in practice. These books are therefore helpful for analyzing how other churches have and are currently

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<sup>6</sup> The meaning of "properly applied" will be explained later in this paper

<sup>7</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 11.

implementing multi-site in their churches, and comparing those uses with practical ways the model could be implemented in the WELS.

*The Multi-Site Church Revolution* sets the tone for literature explaining and trumpeting the multi-site movement. The book was written by experienced multi-site pastors Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, basically as a how-to manual for churches looking to jump on board the multi-site movement. The book explains the model, lays out the logistics, benefits, and challenges of the model, and displays great zeal and excitement for potential widespread usage of the model.

The authorship trio followed up their first book three years later with *Multi-Site Church Road Trip* in which each chapter puts flesh on the bones of a multi-site skeleton, showing how the model can be implemented in different ways in different ministry contexts across the country and world. This book gives some nice ideas for possible replication in WELS contexts, and again presents many of the blessings and challenges of the model.

Books like *Deliberate Simplicity*, *125 Tips for Multi-Site Churches*, and *Multi-Site Churches* follow a similar style, explaining the process of multi-site implementation, pointing out the positive results and blessings of the model, and describing how the different challenges can be avoided or corrected. These books also give practical advice to the pastor or congregation considering multi-site. These books are beneficial for research, to be able to learn more about the model, to see what the positives and negatives might be from pastors and churches who have fought the multi-site battle for a number of years. For a synod without much experience in multi-site, these perspectives are extremely beneficial.

The challenge that exists with most of the extant literature concerning multi-site is the lack of an opposing, devil's advocate perspective. Although most of the books acknowledge that there are challenges and difficulties inherent in multi-site, a writer trying to stir up excitement and support of a model is not going to focus on the negative aspects for very long. However, the book *Franchising McChurch*, by pastors Thomas White and John M. Yeats, was written to warn against possible dangers to the church as a whole due to practices referred to as "easy Christianity" in a number of churches, including multi-site churches. The authors' point is that many churches now use business tactics in order to make their churches more appealing. Yet, in



doing so, they are feeding their “customers” fast-food, unhealthy theology with cheap messages which play on people’s selfish desires. The book gives valuable insight on aspects to consider, keep watch for, and avoid in multi-site implementation.

While much of the literature I read gave good insights into the logistics of multi-site churches, possible hurdles to avoid, and many of the great blessings which implementation can bring about, much of the personal application in the analysis for WELS implementation comes from interviews with WELS pastors and leaders.

### **What is Multi-site?**

When friends, family, and classmates asked about my senior thesis topic, simply saying “an evaluation of multi-site church planting” was not enough. It became apparent that most people in our synod do not have a clear understanding of what multi-site church planting really is, or what distinguishes it from traditional church planting and daughtering of congregations. Therefore, it is important to begin with a discussion of what exactly the multi-site church planting model is, and what the model is not.

A multi-site church can be defined as follows: A multi-site church is one church meeting in multiple locations—different rooms on the same campus, different locations in the same region, or in some instances, different cities, states or nations. A multi-site church shares a common vision, budget, leadership, and board.<sup>8</sup> While this might sound very similar to planting a daughter church, there is a difference. As Geoff Surratt explains,

Many churches ask what the difference is between creating a new campus (also known as a branch campus or satellite) and launching a totally separate, new church (also known as church planting). The idea of one church in multiple locations means you share a common vision, budget, leadership, and board. If your new campus has a vision, budget, leader, or board that’s not part of the sending campus, then you’ve started a new church or a mission campus, not a multi-site campus.<sup>9</sup>

To use an analogy from WELS mission counselor Pastor Peter Kruschel,

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<sup>8</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 51.

Multi-site is not the idea that there is a big mother church which plants new churches, but rather that multi-site churches are like peas in a pod. There are maybe two to six congregations in a “pod.” If one of those congregations wants to start separate churches under their own budget, leadership and board, then they start their own new “pod” of congregations. A bunch of peas in different pods make up a church.<sup>10</sup>

To boil it down to the most basic difference, a multi-site church will have multiple congregations or campuses in different locations, but all of those congregations will be paid for from the same budget and overseen by the same leadership team, even with multiple pastors. A traditional church plant or daughter congregation will have its own separate budget, council, and leadership teams from the original church which daughtered them.

The fact that there are any number of variables and different methods that multi-site churches use to implement their model causes much confusion in determining whether a church is truly multi-site or not. Most books on multi-site describe five broad categories of multi-site models: Video-venue model,<sup>11</sup> regional-campus model,<sup>12</sup> teaching team model,<sup>13</sup> partnership model,<sup>14</sup> and low risk model.<sup>15 16</sup> Multi-site churches often use any of these five models, combinations of two, or sometimes even elements of three to five of these models. This produces hundreds of different possibilities for implementing multi-site church planting. For the sake of brevity, and a basic understanding of what multi-sites churches are, I will simply define multi-sites as “one church, meeting in multiple locations, sharing a common vision, budget, leadership, and board.”

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Kruschel, phone interview by author, October 30, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Creating one or more on-campus environments that use video-cast sermons (live or recorded), often varying the worship style

<sup>12</sup> Replicating the experience of the original campus at additional campuses in order to make church more accessible to other geographic communities

<sup>13</sup> Leveraging a strong teaching team across multiple locations at the original campus or an off-site campus

<sup>14</sup> Partnering with a local business or nonprofit organization to use its facility beyond a mere “renter” arrangement

<sup>15</sup> Experimenting with new locations that have a low level of risk because of the simplicity of programming and low financial investment involved, but that have the potential for high returns in terms of evangelism and growth

<sup>16</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 30.

An important issue to keep in mind for this study of the multi-site model is what the model is not. According to the experts, multi-site is not a growth engine. It will not take a struggling, dying congregation of twenty people and turn it into a congregation of two hundred people just by implementing the model. Rather, it can be a vehicle for a growing church. Multi-site is not a fad to jump on, but it has become a proven strategy to reproduce healthy, fruitful, growing churches. What began as a band aid in the late 1990s for a handful of megachurches that found themselves out of room or restricted by zoning laws, the multi-site idea quickly proved to be an effective option for any healthy, growing church regardless of size. So for implementing multi-site, church size does not necessarily matter, but church health does.<sup>17</sup> When a church is not healthy, it is not wise to spread the illness inside that church by starting a new campus. It would be like trying to fix a bad marriage by having a baby. That sickness in the church's DNA needs to be healed before they consider reproducing. Otherwise, they are just exacerbating the problems, and spreading the disease to another congregation.<sup>18</sup>

As Pastor James McDonald, senior pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel, a non-denominational multi-site church in Rolling Meadows, IL warns, "In my ministry, it is the getting there that has been the great thing, not the arriving. In the same way, multi-site is a vehicle; it is not the destination. So be careful not to covet multi-site. It is extremely complex. It is very draining. It is a ton of work."<sup>19</sup> This is where the "properly applied" portion of my thesis statement comes in.

Multi-site church planting cannot and will not work in every WELS congregation. There are a number of different necessities that must be borne in mind for multi-site to be functional, efficient, and effective. The solution is not to take every congregation in our synod and turn it into a multi-site church, as many multi-site experts might encourage. Multi-site implementation will not work everywhere, and for some churches, going multi-site could produce disastrous results, rather than Spirit-blessed impact. Multi-site is not easy. It is not a quick fix. Yet, given the proper ministry context, leadership, and congregational focus, multi-site church planting can produce tremendous blessings for a congregation, for our synod, and for God's kingdom.

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<sup>17</sup> Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches*, Loc. 41.

<sup>18</sup> Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip: Exploring the New Normal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 206.

<sup>19</sup> Scott McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches: Guidance for the Movement's Next Generation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group) Kindle e-book, Loc. 275.

## The “Necessities” for Multi-site Implementation

Pastor Steve Koelpin, one of two pastors at a WELS multi-site church, Crown of Life in Corona, CA, had this advice for churches looking to implement multi-site.

When a church is looking for a silver bullet to grow their ministry, grow their church, and reach the lost, the silver bullet that works for Corona isn't going to work for St. John's, Baraboo necessarily. I'm not saying that multi-site wouldn't work for them. But, as the pastor of a congregation, you need to know your situation and the people you're serving. Whatever ministry context you're in dictates what works and what doesn't.<sup>20</sup>

While it is up to the pastor of each congregation to individually evaluate whether his gifts, the gifts of the congregation, and the area in which he is ministering, is a good fit for multi-site ministry, there are some guidelines and factors which are helpful in determining whether multi-site would be a beneficial model for the church to implement.

Stovall Weems, lead pastor and founder of Celebration Church, a non-denominational multi-site church centered in Jacksonville, FL, sums up the proper characteristics of a church for implementing multi-site: “A church that is serious about reaching people, serious about expanding the kingdom of God, serious about building team leadership in your church, and a church that is growing. In this situation, multi-site is a huge tool to be able to reach more people.”<sup>21</sup> Pastor Peter Kruschel agrees that the multi-site model “should be used for mission outreach, not for maintaining congregations.”<sup>22</sup>

As is evident from these two quotations, the main focus of multi-site is not to rebuild a dying or declining church. Multi-site is not intended to maintain the status quo of a congregation. The focus and purpose of the multi-site church model is to reach as many people as humanly possible with the gospel. Therefore, if a church is going to pursue a multi-site model,

That church's frame of reference must first move off of itself. When a church sees that its purpose is to reach those who do not know Jesus Christ, it will function differently. Your church cannot become an effective multi-site church if its frame of reference is inward.

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<sup>20</sup> Steve Koelpin, phone interview by author, October 29, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc 191.

<sup>22</sup> Kruschel, phone interview.

Your church cannot become an effective multi-site church if your vision for the future is limited to those you have reached in the past.<sup>23</sup>

When a church is not showing vital signs of growth, a passion for sharing the gospel, a focus on equipping people to step into new areas of ministry, and does not have a natural tendency to seek kingdom growth, then multi-site will only magnify the weaknesses.<sup>24</sup> I believe that along with a zeal for mission work and a perpetual desire to reach out to the lost in their area, the members of a congregation also need to completely buy-in to their church implementing a multi-site model. As WELS Board for Home Missions Administrator Pastor Keith Free stated, “It’s a necessity that a congregation jumps in with both feet. If you are going to do multi-site that needs to be your focus entirely.”<sup>25</sup>

Along with a necessity for the people of the congregation to have a willing, mission-minded spirit, it is also necessary for the pastor and the lay leadership of the congregation to be willing to work hard. Pastor Rick Johnson of Crown of Life, Corona, CA describes the boost in his work load once his congregation added a second site:

The multi-site paradigm means the staff has to work harder; a lot harder. Before we called a second pastor, I did three services every Sunday, driving back and forth between the two sites. I also spent at least one day a week in Beaumont (the location of the second site) doing outreach, pastoral calls, Bible study etc. while maintaining all the ministry at the original campus.<sup>26</sup>

In order for a pastor to steer his church in a direction that will increase his workload-- even if the second site calls a second pastor-- he must be fully devoted to pursuing the multi-site focus of mission outreach, even at the expense of his own time. The addition of multiple sites also necessitates strong lay leadership from the members of the congregation. A pastor is unable to properly accomplish all of the tasks at a single campus, let alone the tasks required at two campuses sometimes spread as far as thirty miles apart. The members and lay leaders of the congregation need to be willing to step into leadership roles and service roles for the campus they attend. As a church implements multi-site, they are spreading people out across a bigger

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<sup>23</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc. 1360.

<sup>24</sup> Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches*, Loc. 195.

<sup>25</sup> Keith Free, interview by author, Waukesha, WI, October 21, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, interview.

board that will be harder to balance. They are exponentially increasing the complexity of providing leadership. Without effective leadership and communication, the new site could flounder.<sup>27</sup>

As for the physical second campus, Geoff Surratt offers the following five emphases to keep in mind.<sup>28</sup> First of all, the congregation needs to focus on finding the right leaders for the second campus. Most of the time in Evangelical or Non-Denominational churches, the subsequent campuses are pastored by a “campus pastor.” More often than not, the new campus pastor was a member at the original sending campus who played some sort of leadership role at that campus, whether as a council member, Bible study leader, or small group coach. Then, when the pastors of that campus see this man (or woman) as having leadership potential, they begin to groom and train them to take over the next site as campus pastor. As campus pastor, they will do the majority of the teaching and leading of worship at their site. Therefore, the necessity of finding the right pastoral leadership is important for these churches. For WELS congregations, that necessity falls less on the shoulders of the pastor at the main campus as it falls on prayerfully trusting the Holy Spirit to select and call the right pastoral leader for that campus. However, identifying and encouraging lay leaders from that congregation to serve on the executive council for the entire church is vastly important, as well as selecting and encouraging children’s ministry leaders and small group leaders.

Another emphasis is to find the right community in which to open the next campus. If a moderate amount of the church’s membership is coming from a neighboring community or city, it makes sense to open the next site in that community so that the site can start with a large core group of believers as that campus begins reaching out to their community. The church will also look for a community in need of a church like theirs, or a growing community with large numbers of unchurched people moving in. One expert in multi-site suggests that the “sweet spot” in distance from the sending church in which to launch the second site is about ten to twenty

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<sup>27</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc. 932.

<sup>28</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 112-117.

minutes driving distance from the site, as the average church goer lives within a fifteen minute drive of the church which they attend.<sup>29</sup>

After finding the right community, then the church must select the location in that community in which to rent or build their site. Surratt suggests that the church seek out a high visibility location in a growing area, surrounded by plenty of shopping centers, housing developments, and schools. As in real estate, location is also key for churches.

Once the community and location in that community are selected for the new site, it is then the task of the congregation to advertise the new congregation and reach out to people. Possibilities include mass mailings, billboards and signs, radio and newspaper ads, and FRAN<sup>30</sup> invites for the core group to give to their friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers. Finally, Surratt wisely suggests that the congregation “pray like crazy.”

Often, the most compelling and impactful advice on a subject comes from people who have taken the leap and tried something previously. If that person failed in their goal, they have a keen concept of what could have been done differently in order to bring about success. I had the opportunity to receive such advice from Pastor Randy Hunter, pastor of WELS congregation St. Andrew’s in Middleton, WI. He was able to share with me what he called his congregation’s “stupid tax”—their biggest takeaways after starting a satellite congregation of St. Andrew’s in Waunakee, WI which eventually closed after about five years of operation. According to Pastor Hunter, their satellite congregation, which met in the building of a WELS church which asked St. Andrew’s to take over their ministry, experienced a lot of initial blessings in the first two years of operation, gaining members and adult confirmands, and capturing the vision that they had put forth to “get out of their building” and go to where the people were.<sup>31</sup>

However, the site eventually dwindled down to almost nothing after some issues, and the church’s leadership decided to close its doors. That’s not to say that this multi-site implementation failed. In Pastor Hunter’s own words, “We didn’t fail. We were able to feed people with the Word and sacraments, and allowed people to perform wonderful lay leadership

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<sup>29</sup> Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches*, Loc. 140.

<sup>30</sup> Acronym which stands for “Friends, Relatives, and Neighbors”

<sup>31</sup> Randy Hunter, phone interview by author, November 1, 2013.

in the process. We didn't fail. We just decided that things weren't working out the way we had planned, and so we closed it down." This attitude of "failing forward," trying something new and adventurous in order to spread the gospel, is not a bad thing. As Pastor Hunter asked, can a church really be called a failure or a great success based solely on numbers? Isn't success found rather in the number of souls that are touched and nurtured through the work of a ministry? This attitude of analyzing the ministry context and then simply giving God something to bless is, in my opinion, a good and beneficial attitude to have.

Although St. Andrew's first multi-site implementation did not go as planned, the experience gave their leadership team great insight into what to do or not do next time—and they are strongly looking into opening another site in the future—for greater success in carrying out their vision for a second site.

One big takeaway was that in the future, they would never start another site without a full time staff member devoted to carrying out the ministry there. A lay leader led worship services at the Waunakee site, with a recording of Pastor Hunter's sermon played via DVD. However, the lay leader of the site and the leadership of the congregation did not see eye to eye on a number of issues which caused problems. Therefore, Pastor Hunter advises calling a called worker who would minister at the original campus—in his case, in Middleton-- for a year or two in advance of opening the new site which that called worker would shepherd. This setup would allow the called worker to absorb the culture of the congregation, work to build relationships and do outreach in that new target area, and start implementing education before launching worship at the new site.

Tied in with that setup, Pastor Hunter also suggests that the site should have children's education up and running by the launch of the first worship service. Although they had started children's programs about six months after the launch of the second site, many families had already visited and moved on to another church because the site did not offer any programs for children.

Pastor Hunter also stressed the importance of the location of the new site. Their previous site had been tucked away in an exclusive, small residential area. The building was not very visible, and few people knew where it was. For the next site, they plan to look for a high traffic



location, somewhere extra visible, with a high volume of people walking or driving past, close to shopping centers or just off the freeway.

Obviously, there are no “absolutes” that must be in place in order for a church to implement multi-site church planting with resultant great spiritual blessing for God’s kingdom. Certainly the Holy Spirit can work to create and strengthen faith even in a multi-site congregation with minimal lay leadership, or lacking any of the “necessities” listed previously. Even a congregation which fits these criteria might not have the huge numerical impact some multi-site churches have. The success of that church, as with all churches, depends on the work of God, not the people. But from a human perspective, it is important for a congregation to assess its spiritual health before launching a new site.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, above all other characteristics and analysis, a multi-site congregation can guarantee success by faithfully preaching and teaching the Word of God, and faithfully administering the sacraments, thus fulfilling the Great Commission in carrying the message of the gospel to all people. As pastor, author, and radio personality Dr. Gene Getz reminds,

The key for any church is that the teaching of Scripture must be strong. When churches emphasize watered-down teaching in hopes of attracting seekers, that ministry suffers from a fatal flaw. Weak teaching equals weak results. If a church believes it ought to move to a satellite format, it must hinge everything on strong biblical teaching. Teach the Word in depth and with quality, and unbelievers will still come to the gospel.<sup>33</sup>

### **Blessings of Properly Applied Multi-site Churches**

As is apparent from many of the authors who write books on the multi-site church movement, multi-site is not an easy plan to introduce. It is not a simple or quick remedy for a congregation’s illness. The model is not meant for every church to use. Joe Stowell, pastor at non-denominational Harvest Bible Chapel in Rolling Meadows, IL warns,

Multi-site has become a cool thing to do. As a result, many churches are thinking about it. If God is leading you to do it, then go for it. But I wouldn’t do it just to do it. It’s a lot

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<sup>32</sup> Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches*, Loc. 216.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 157.

of work and I do think it's hard on the staff. Sometimes I wonder, are there people doing this that maybe don't need to do it, and who could have better focused their resources and efforts into deeper, better ministry where they are?<sup>34</sup>

As an aside, it is important to note that the authors and pastors I quote in this thesis paper are not quoted for their theological soundness or doctrinal beliefs. They are quoted for their opinions, thoughts, and experience with the multi-site model. As one Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary professor said, "You don't look in a cookbook to learn how to throw a tight football spiral. Neither should you look to the church growth movement to learn about the workings of the Holy Spirit. But there are a number of practical, non-doctrinal things we can learn from them." I do not vouch for the doctrinal beliefs of many of the pastors outside the WELS. I do, however, find their practical advice and opinions helpful and beneficial for this study.

So what's the point? If this model of church planting is not necessarily easier or universally applicable for our churches, why should WELS implement multi-site more expansively? If the model is not one hundred percent effective or practical for every church, why should our synod dip its toe into such new, different, and untested waters? The answer lies in the vast number of possible blessings from this church planting model. Although the blessings and impact the Holy Spirit can produce are many and varied from church to church, and may vary depending on the model of multi-site which is implemented, I have narrowed the scope to five major blessings which God will shower upon our synod through wider range implementation of multi-site.

### **Blessing One—Multi-site is Financially Feasible for Most WELS Budgets and Manpower**

It is not a secret that the WELS spends many hours discussing financial issues, how to allocate resources, and how to expand our reach with the gospel without running out of money. In fact, our synod is not alone in this matter. For many churches and church bodies across America, money is not always as plentiful as would be ideal for carrying out ministry work. Not every church has millions of dollars in cash stored away to build vast cathedrals and skyscraping worship structures. Therefore, churches are finding other ways to expand their reach and influence in their communities besides constructing expensive, expansive church buildings. More

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<sup>34</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc. 236-242.

and more churches are renting non-traditional facilities in which to hold worship and do ministry, or at least using these facilities as extra sites off the campus of the original church building. Writing in 2009, the authors of *The Multi-Site Church Road Trip* predicted that “the day is rapidly approaching when few will find it unusual for a church to offer simultaneous worship services in a sanctuary, gym, and chapel or even in the original church building, a public school across town, a theater adjacent to the nearby university, and the clubhouse of a retirement community thirty miles away.”<sup>35</sup>

Pastor Keith Free thinks that multi-site is “a more economical way to do things; a cheaper date, if you will.”<sup>36</sup> While starting another congregation which will purchase property and build a traditional church building is one of the many possible variations of multi-site, that option will incur similar start-up costs as normal daughtering of a congregation does. However, if the congregation is truly multi-site, both congregations will fall under the same budget. Therefore, the second site should not require much, if any, financial assistance from the synod to pay for property and building, since their expenses will be covered by the collective church budget. Although the start-up costs are not cheap, those start-up costs are covered by that multi-site church, rather than by the synod, freeing up synod dollars to be devoted for other work or mission starts.

Many multi-site churches are saving money by renting facilities for their sites, rather than purchasing land and building brick and mortar sanctuaries. This rental concept initially came about as a band-aid for megachurch congregations which were running out of space and parking during peak worship times. Many were hindered by zoning laws in cities which prohibited them from expanding their worship facilities. Others were hindered by a lack of funds to buy property and construct another worship building. This led many churches to rent, rather than buying or building facilities.

Although the estimated cost differential between building a new site or renting a new site differs depending on who you talk to, what kind of facility is being rented, and what kind of equipment and support staff are needed for the site, the reported numbers are often vastly

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<sup>35</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Free, interview.

different. Scott McConnell, associate director of Lifeway Research, estimates that the cost of building a new facility totals around \$7-8 million for that one facility, property, and operating costs. In contrast, the cost of launching additional rented sites is between \$100,000 and \$120,000.<sup>37</sup> Using that calculation, it would be possible to start seventy five rental sites for the cost of one new facility. Multi-site guru Jim Tomberlin estimates that “the average cost of launching a multi-site campus in a low risk, low cost facility, usually in a school or movie theater, is \$250,000.”<sup>38</sup>

Although those two estimations are over \$100,000 different, the evidence is stark. Starting a new site by renting a low risk, low cost facility can save churches millions of dollars. Imagine how many more people can be reached by starting seventy five different worship sites spread over a large geographic area than can be reached through one \$8 million sanctuary on purchased land. Planting sites for less money is not just about saving money, but is a matter of proving faithful with the trust God has given to the church (1 Corinthians 4:2).

In a synod trying to expand the reach of God’s Word, while at the same time trying to remain fiscally responsible, it is hard to ignore such numbers. Pastor Peter Kruschel sees the same kind of blessing for the WELS as shown by these two estimates from other church bodies.

Multi-site planting is a less expensive way for us (WELS) to plant missions. There are fixed costs, but depending on the model we choose out of the dozens of possibilities, we can do it that way and start new missions in a far less expensive way, especially without the need for buying land and buildings. By doing this, you keep the church focusing on reaching out with the gospel, rather than focusing on the land and the building. It saves money.<sup>39</sup>

Pastor Kruschel envisions a mission planting strategy that expands the reach of the gospel while spending less money over time to do so. In California, Pastor Steve Koelpin and the Crown of Life ministry team see similar cheap start-up costs for their sites, which have allowed them to expand the geographic area which they can touch with the gospel. He explains that starting new sites can be as easy as “having a core group of about ten families. If each of those families gives, on average, one hundred dollars in their monthly offerings, we can pay off the rental of a

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<sup>37</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc. 162.

<sup>38</sup> Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches*, Loc. 98.

<sup>39</sup> Kruschel, interview.

worship facility for the month (without having to receive any money from the main budget to pay rent.) The philosophy comes from a financial standpoint.”<sup>40</sup> Pastor Rick Johnson and the members of the original site in Corona started another site in Beaumont with no outside money other than “about \$3,000 from the Lutheran Women’s Mission Society for equipment.”<sup>41</sup>

This low risk model of multi-site is not only being implemented in the outlying districts away from the Midwest. Although they receive no synod subsidy and have become an established WELS congregation, Pastor Jason Ewart and Hope Lutheran Church in Dousman, WI still remain a mobile church, renting the facility in which they worship and have education on Sunday mornings. As a growing, established congregation, the leadership team at Hope was analyzing what the next logical step would be. They determined it is to go multi-site. Pastor Ewart explains, “We were set up to expand in a unique way. While others rely on home missions, we realized the unique situation we were in; that without any subsidy we can open a new church. For less than a capital campaign, we can start a new church using this model.”<sup>42</sup>

Hope decided to remain a portable church in rented space each Sunday because it allows them to devote a much larger chunk of their budget for ministry work. This model gives them a “really low overhead, which makes it really affordable.” According to Pastor Ewart, “What an average church pays for utilities, facilities, and mortgage payments eats up a lot of their budget. Hope’s is only about thirteen to fifteen percent of the total budget, and that covers all rent, a small office for meetings and office space, and everything associated with facility and utility costs. This is only a sliver of the budget, compared to most churches.”<sup>43</sup> This low cost gives them a much bigger budget for staffing, ministry, marketing/advertising, and evangelism. In other words, paying less money for bricks and mortar frees up more money to use in reaching out and bringing people in to their worship services, and making that worship excellent.

Some people would argue that using rented space for worship, rather than having an established sanctuary and grounds, is a negative facet of Hope’s model. Pastor Ewart encourages, “Let’s just get rid of the idea that when we have a church building, then we’ll be a church. We

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<sup>40</sup> Koelpin, interview.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, interview.

<sup>42</sup> Jason Ewart, phone interview with author, November 30, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Ewart, interview.

have the Word, the sacraments, and God's people. Where two or three come together in God's name, he's there with them (Matthew 18:20). We're a real church; as real as a church can get."<sup>44</sup>

For some churches, land is simply too expensive to purchase in their region of the country. Pointing to the high cost of land in the Los Angeles area of California, Pastor Peter Kruschel acknowledges,

More so, the problem is that we can't afford to buy land and build in certain areas of the country anymore. The greater Los Angeles area has nearly 20 million people, all of whom need to hear the Gospel. But I can't imagine us buying land and building there again. It's simply just too expensive. But if we can establish mission outposts and worship in rented facilities, then essentially, it's not much different than other churches in California.<sup>45</sup>

Scott McConnell simply summarizes this first blessing of multi-site. "Multi-site breaks barriers to growth that is lack of space and lack of money to expand."<sup>46</sup>

### **Blessing Two —Multi-site Increases Opportunities for Lay Leadership and Stewardship**

It is not a secret that across the country and across denominations, it is a difficult task to motivate a large portion of a congregation to volunteer and play a role in the ministry of the body of Christ. There is a phrase spoken in church circles, that "twenty percent of the people do eighty percent of the work." The reality of that statement is pretty powerful. Getting the people in a congregation to perform ministry tasks that will require them to do more than just attend a service on Sunday is no easy task for a pastor. Yet, even though it is difficult, it is a task which God himself has commanded pastors to carry out. In Ephesians 4, Paul writes, "It was he (God) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ might be built up (Ephesians 4:11-12)."

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<sup>44</sup> Ewart, interview.

<sup>45</sup> Kruschel, interview.

<sup>46</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc. 145-150.

One of the blessings of multi-site church planting is that it presents numerous opportunities for lay people to participate in the leadership and ministry of their congregation and church, as God wills them to.

Many critics of the multi-site model believe that when a congregation is overseen by a panel of executives and a couple lead pastors, the leadership capabilities of lay people will be stifled. Spectators are created rather than disciples and leaders. Pastor Geoff Surratt disagrees, citing his observation of his own multi-site church, and many others like it. “I think it’s actually the opposite. Multi-site actually increases the pool of biblical leaders because in a multi-site church there are folks that have opened up to them a place to exercise leadership that would have been unavailable in one larger campus.”<sup>47</sup> According to a study by the Leadership Network, four out of five interviewed multi-site churches reported an increase in their development of lay leaders.<sup>48</sup>

However, most multi-site churches can report increases in their lay leadership development because many non-denominational and Evangelical multi-site churches do not have ministry-trained pastors at all of their sites. Capable lay leaders from the original site are often identified and appointed by the lead pastor to become a campus pastor at a new site. So, many multi-site pastors are constantly on the lookout for lay people who show leadership potential, that they might be trained to become the next site’s campus pastor. In WELS, where pastors must be extensively and properly trained, called, and ordained before shepherding a congregation, our lay leadership development would not increase in order to fill new sites with new pastors.<sup>49</sup> However, the potential to increase and develop opportunities for more extensive lay leadership in other tasks and roles in our churches is very much viable and exciting.

Multi-site more or less increases lay leadership development through a formula of “addition by subtraction.” If a multi-site church plants a new site in an area where many of the original campus’s members live, many of those people will form the core group of the new site

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<sup>47</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip*, 193.

<sup>48</sup> Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches*, Loc. 160.

<sup>49</sup> Unless this identification were combined with the WELS Pastoral Studies Institute program, or Seminary Certification program. These programs allow laymen to receive proper training, instruction, and practical experience to become an ordained pastor in our synod.

and attend church there. This means that by starting a new site, the original campus might be sending twenty to fifty members away to a new campus, leaving a number of leadership positions unfilled at the original campus. The original site will then need other members to step up and fill those leadership and volunteer positions. As Jason Ewart points out, “Multi-site creates a need for more leaders. If you’re sending away fifty people, now you have fifty vacancies. Planting new sites creates opportunities for more people to step up into ministry roles, who maybe weren’t getting an opportunity before.”<sup>50</sup>

Planting new sites necessitates that other people step up in positions to use their God-given gifts to serve the Lord and lead his church. As former leaders and volunteers move on to the new site, new leaders have to emerge. Often, when a pastor loses a key member of his church’s leadership team, he is pleasantly surprised when another member volunteers to lead and fills the position admirably, sometimes even better than their predecessor. Sometimes the only impetus needed for a person to volunteer to take over a leadership position is to see it as a need in their church which must be filled. Many people never volunteer or lead because they perceive that “someone else will do it” or “there are not any open positions for me to serve.” Pastor Rick Rusaw of Lifebridge Church, and non-denominational multi-site in Longmont, CO sees lay leaders as the lifeblood of the church, and was amazed at the resulting boost in volunteers when they started new sites. “One of our members said it this way: “I used to come and be active in attending but always thought they had plenty of people to help; now I realize that there were always opportunities to get involved and I couldn’t hide behind the ‘someone else will do it’ mentality.” We had a substantial increase in new volunteers at both new campuses.”<sup>51</sup> Members who have never before volunteered become engaged in their church because their eyes have been opened to positions of need; positions that they can fill with their gifts and abilities.

Whether it be the necessity for leaders to emerge to fill the positions vacated at the original site as members form the core group of the new site, or new positions that need to be filled at the new site, multi-site enables untapped talent to emerge each time a new site is opened.

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<sup>50</sup> Ewart, interview.

<sup>51</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc. 1230.



“Whatever a person’s gifting, experience or availability, there is always a place for him or her to experience the joy of serving.”<sup>52</sup>

Increased involvement in the leadership and gospel ministry also builds a deeper connection between people and their church, their pastor, and their fellow members. When a member has bought in enough to volunteer or perform a leadership role, the church becomes “my church” rather than just “that church I go to on Sundays.”

In our interview, Jason Ewart raved about what multi-site can do for the spirit of a congregation.

It’s all about getting people involved in ministry; utilizing the priesthood of all believers. This creates a context where everyone’s a player in the ministry of God’s kingdom. Once someone gets involved in planting a new church, there’s nothing like it. Everyone needs to be on board and all in, pouring their life into whatever their role may be. That’s a different experience in the church.<sup>53</sup>

That might be a frightening concept for many pastors who have seen congregations struggle to find the right people to volunteer or to carry out leadership roles. Is it the best idea to send away some of the best leaders we have in our church to be leaders at another site? Scott Reavely, senior pastor of New Life Church, a Baptist multi-site in the suburbs of Portland, Oregon, wrestled with this question. But he has also seen the fruit that God produced when his church put their trust in the Lord to provide the people and resources they would need.

Emotionally, there was significant resistance to saying goodbye to people we’ve known for many years, and financially, it would be devastating to send out a large portion of our givers. Now I feel free to encourage my best givers and best workers to go to our new sites without the fear that we as the sending location will never recover. The spiritual fruit has been wonderful.<sup>54</sup>

Becoming a multi-site church, and planting more sites, is an act of faith and trust in God, as is any form of mission planting. Multi-site allows the members of the church to be very open-handed with their resources: their time, talents, and treasures. In planting sites, the church exercises its faith, and that is an immense blessing for lay people and called workers alike. By

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<sup>52</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> Ewart, interview.

<sup>54</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 33.

implementing multi-site, the members at the original site gain nothing. Jason Ewart compares it to giving birth. The mother does not receive anything from the baby by giving birth to it. Rather, she only sacrifices. Multi-site requires the members to be purely open-handed in giving away resources, both physical and financial. The original site will have to lose some people to the new site in order to carry out this ministry.<sup>55</sup> Yet, as much sacrifice is made by a mother giving birth, when that child is born, she does not complain about the sacrifice and pain of the process. She rejoices in this new blessing, and continues to sacrifice for the child as she cares for it and nurtures it as it grows. What a blessing for a church to sacrifice some of itself in order to give birth to another site, and expand the reach of the gospel to those who so desperately need to hear it.

Multi-site requires sacrifice from its people: to be open-handed with their resources, to give away people and leaders to help build up the new sites, to step up and fill leadership positions and volunteer roles. However, the expanded development of lay leadership, the exercise of faith from the congregation, and the deeper connection to the church and the gospel which multi-site can bring are priceless blessings.

### **Blessing Three—Multi-site Maintains Small Church Feel, with Big Church Impact**

For decades, megachurches ruled the church landscape. However, many view being part of a smaller group as a desirable thing, both in American churches and in general society. People enjoy being an individual, rather than just a number, or one person in a vast sea of faces.

Jim Tomberlin observes, “The new big is small. Though the majority of megachurches have multiple campuses, smaller multi-site churches already outnumber them and will lead the way in launching new campuses with a smaller core in smaller communities.”<sup>56</sup>

Some might wonder why a church would want to remain small. If the mission is to reach out to as many people as possible, why would a church not want 20,000 people in its pews every weekend? Yet, there is a sense of intimacy and connectedness that can only be captured in a small church setting. In a megachurch of 10,000 people, the members will not know each other very well. They will not know when their fellow church goer is headed to the hospital for

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<sup>55</sup> Ewart, Interview.

<sup>56</sup> Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches*, Loc. 230.

surgery, or that another member's grandmother just died. In a large church, the sense of intimate fellowship with fellow Christians and the encouragement which believers are to share with each other can be lost in the crowd (Hebrews 10:25). Smaller congregations are better able to know their fellow believers and their spiritual shepherd on a more personal level.

WELS members tend to embrace the small church feel many of our congregations offer. Members like to make personal connections with fellow members. Members like to personally know their pastors. In general, most WELS members like their worship services, Bible studies, and fellowship time to be personal and intimate; to enable close, spiritual, friendly, familial connections with fellow members. Having a small church feel is important. Connecting with the previous blessing of lay leadership, "The smaller the church, the more actively involved the individuals in the pews are in the governance of the church."<sup>57</sup> Having a "smaller" church is a blessing in many ways.

According to Baptist pastor Scott Reavely, not only WELS members enjoy the small church feel. As his church, Lifebridge Church, sought to be more evangelical in reaching out to the community around them, he has found that "non-Christians seem to like the idea of us starting small neighborhood congregations rather than trying to grow bigger in one location."<sup>58</sup> Even many non-churched people enjoy the idea of attending a smaller, more personal church, rather than being a number in the massive, faceless flock of a megachurch.

However, as much as it is a blessing to retain a small church feel in each individual congregation, the multi-site model also offers the blessing of having the impact on a community that larger churches can have, while still maintaining a small church feel. Pastor Rick Johnson explains,

We talk about small church intimacy with larger church impact. We have resources by combining four services in three places that we would not have if we were only in one place. We receive four offerings each week, and record the attendance of four groups of Christians each week. We have volunteers from four sites working. You get the picture. The worship works. The money works. The outreach works.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 78.

<sup>58</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 33.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, interview.

Multi-site gives members a chance to have the best of both worlds. The motivation to implement multi-site is to reach as many people as possible with the gospel. If a church reaches as many people as possible in their one building, that church will sacrifice a small, personal, intimate setting if two thousand people are crowded into their sanctuary. Community Bible Church, an Evangelical interdenominational church in San Antonio, TX is a good example of a multi-site church which gives members the chance to attend a church with an intimate atmosphere, while belonging to a church that still has a huge impact on its community.

Across their nine sites, Community Bible averages about 13,000 people in weekly worship attendance.<sup>60</sup> Their reach is wide, stretching across Texas and even into Mexico. Yet, Community Bible’s eight off-site campuses average only about twelve percent of the church’s total attendance. Each site averages 150 or fewer people in services on a weekend.<sup>61</sup> The site maintains an intimate church feel, while still being part of a church which reaches 13,000 people every weekend with their message.

Multi-site allows all the different campuses of a church to contextualize their church to fit with the unique ministry context in which they serve. This allows a church to grow both smaller and larger at the same time, without losing its distinct identity.<sup>62</sup>

#### **Blessing Four—Multi-site Brings Church to People Where They Are, Both Geographically and Socially, Instead of Making People Come to the Church**

The mission of the church has always been to take the gospel to people. As was pointed out, making disciples is precisely what Jesus commanded the church to do. However, the focus of the church is usually, “How can we get people to come here and walk through the front door of our church?” rather than, “How can we bring the front door of our church to people?”

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<sup>60</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip*, 57.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Pastor Steve Koelpin expressed his excitement that through multi-site, “We can bring church to the people, rather than making them come to us. They can bring their friends and their family. We’re bringing church to the people, rather than making them drive from other places.”<sup>63</sup>

Although traveling longer distances is easier today than ever before, distance still remains a negative factor for people looking for a church. Many people commute long distances to work during the week, so they don’t want to make a long commute to church on the weekend as well. Even if some families are willing to drive thirty minutes for church on Sunday morning, “people who live beyond the 30 minute mark rarely invite non-churched people as their guests and had a much lower frequency rate for midweek participation. They had a lower volunteerism rate and lower small group involvement. Their children weren’t as involved either.”<sup>64</sup> The distance of the church from its members not only affects the members, but it often prohibits friendship evangelism to be carried out to friends, family, and co-workers who live the same distance away. Distance can also stifle the spiritual growth brought about by ministry that takes place during the week, and through lay leadership and service.

As will be pointed out in the next section, the multi-site model allows churches to extend their reach further into a community by replicating the experience of the original campus in additional campuses in surrounding regions. This brings the church closer to unchurched people and removes the “too far away” excuses.<sup>65</sup>

As with any church, multi-site churches rely heavily on friendship evangelism. People are more likely to come to a church when someone they know will be there also. Therefore, it is important to bring the church close enough to the majority of members so that they will feel comfortable inviting friends, family, and co-workers to church. Rick Rusaw, pastor of Lifebridge Community Church in Longmont, CO, notes the growth of social connection when the distance gap is closed.

Closing the distance created more social connection. People who were attending our main campus from another community often didn’t or couldn’t get their friends and neighbors to join them. When the church moved to their neighborhood, their natural connections

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<sup>63</sup> Koelpin, interview.

<sup>64</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 34.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

and community involvement opened the doors to get their friends to join them. Each of our new campuses have found that more than 75% of attendees had no previous connection to Lifebridge's original campus. Whether the distances we are closing are proximity, social, or cultural, closing those distances people have to "travel" is critical.<sup>66</sup>

Pastor Rusaw emphasizes an important point in his quote. Certainly, distance in terms of proximity and driving distance are issues that can be counter-productive in reaching out to the lost. However, churches also need to keep in mind that distance in social and cultural terms can be extremely counter-productive to evangelism, especially in ethnically or socially diverse areas.

Even taking geographic distance out of the equation, there are hundreds of thousands of people who are within driving distance of our churches who, not believing in Christ, are headed for hell. It is not an option to avoid thinking about these people.<sup>67</sup> Having multiple sites allows a church to figure out what the "x-factor" is in the community they are ministering to. There are differences in every community, and a church will want to discover that x-factor-- the thing which will get them inroads into the community and will build trust—so unchurched people will actually come and visit the church; even if that x-factor necessitates changes from the other sites of the church.<sup>68</sup>

While many multi-site churches try to replicate the experience at the original campus in each of the sites as much as possible, the multi-site model does allow for some adaptation and change, rather than just a "one size fits all/cookie cutter" mentality. The site can then adapt to better fit its particular ministry context.<sup>69</sup>

For many multi-site churches, that adaptability shows itself by worshiping in a non-traditional worship space, such as a movie theater, school cafeteria, hotel conference room, or shopping center. Many analysts and pastors view the traditional church building with steeple, pews, dress clothes, and organ to be an intimidating experience for those who have no background in the church. Dave Browning, pastor of Christ the King, a non-denominational

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<sup>66</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc. 1235.

<sup>67</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc. 1433.

<sup>69</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip*, 16.

multi-site church in Seattle, WA, explains his church's preference for non-traditional worship space.

We find that the (traditional church) architecture itself can be a psychological barrier to the welcoming environment we are trying to create. We much prefer public spaces, where people already congregate for other reasons. Since these are places where unchurched people may already feel comfortable, we don't have to work so hard to help them feel at home.<sup>70</sup>

Pastor Keith Free agrees that many people today "have a different mindset about church. This (traditional church buildings and worship) is what mom and dad did. This (non-traditional sites and worship) is different. Multi-site doesn't always have that "churchy" feel. There are so many changes in society regarding thoughts on church." He pointed to Victory of the Lamb Lutheran Church in Franklin, WI, which worships in a movie theater, as an example. "It is a less threatening environment in multi-site. It is less traditional, and it is more comfortable to visitors."<sup>71</sup>

For people who have spent their entire lives worshipping in a traditional church building, it can be difficult to understand how walking into a traditional church can be intimidating, rather than comforting and inviting. Yet, many people shy away from places they are not used to. People desire to feel comfortable, and if they have never been in a traditional church building, it can be so intimidating that they will avoid walking through the front door. They feel far more comfortable to walk into a school, a movie theater, or a hotel; places where these people have been hundreds of times before, even if those familiar locations are now converted into a worship space.

That is not to say that every WELS church should move out of their building and rent a movie theater for worship. There are some people who feel far more comfortable walking into an 150 year-old white brick sanctuary with a towering steeple than they would worshipping in a movie theater. However, it is important to consider the ways that our church body can reach out with the gospel to the largest number of people, meeting them where they are socially.

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<sup>70</sup> Dave Browning, *Deliberate Simplicity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 113.

<sup>71</sup> Free, interview.

For other churches, the adaptability of multi-site is displayed in worship style. Multi-site can work with traditional worship, contemporary worship, or with blended worship. Pastor Peter Kruschel encourages multi-site churches to “tailor the service to what is comfortable to the community you serve. In California, for example, you cannot usually start a church with traditional services anymore. People there are used to praise bands and auditoriums. Many do not even know what a traditional, liturgical service or church looks like.”

It is a good thing for a multi-site church to be adaptable in worship in order to reach out to those who are not being served by the churches around them. That is not to say those churches are not conducting proper, faithful ministry. However, the preferences of people, whether warranted or not, can cause them to overlook some churches. For example, if the majority of people in California prefer contemporary worship, might it be a better idea for that WELS site to use traditional, liturgical worship? If this church is surrounded by other churches which have loads of money and resources to do excellent, top notch contemporary worship, would it be a better idea for the WELS site to do excellent traditional, liturgical worship? This allows them to reach the smaller demographic of people who love traditional worship and make this minority their own. Rather than competing with contemporary churches who have too much money and resources to compete with, the site can implement the opposite style, which can be done excellently. By serving those who are not being served by other churches, a number of souls can hear the message who wouldn't hear it otherwise.

This was the thought process of Hope Lutheran Church in Dousman, WI. In Pastor Ewart's words,

Oconomowoc didn't need another usual WELS church. There are WELS churches all over the area, and all of them are doing good ministry. But they're very similar in approach, style, and ministries that they run. The weakness of that is they all generally fail to reach certain demographics. Hope's main goal is to reach the people that the rest of the churches aren't reaching.<sup>72</sup>

Really, that spirit encapsulates what the Apostle Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 9:22.<sup>73</sup> The flexibility of style which the multi-site model provides makes it extremely beneficial in

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<sup>72</sup> Ewart, interview.

<sup>73</sup> “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”



reaching out to unbelievers and non-churched people where they are. It allows those without a church to feel comfortable, served by what they are used to, whether that is a traditional, contemporary, or blended style of worship.

Many churches have begun opening cross-cultural campuses in neighborhoods very different from their primary campus.<sup>74</sup> Multi-site allows people of a different culture to remain part of the church, while still maintaining their traditional worship style. The ability to worship with people who are the same race and culture makes for greater comfort, and takes away the negative hurdle of “standing out” in the crowd. For example, a congregation in a heavily Hispanic community could reach out to that demographic by starting a Spanish-speaking site with a Spanish-speaking pastor. This allows the church to reach out into a community and touch people’s hearts with the gospel when the Spanish population might not feel comfortable sitting in the pews of a largely Caucasian congregation for worship otherwise. While maintaining the truth of God’s Word in the preaching and teaching, the flexibility allows cultural groups to maintain their traditional style and culture. “This gives them (cultural groups) an opportunity to have services for a much smaller financial price than by starting their own church.”<sup>75</sup>

While it is a blessing for multi-site to present the flexibility and adaptability churches need to bring the gospel to people where they are, our WELS multi-site churches can never be flexible with doctrine. They must always correctly handle the Word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). We can never adapt or change our doctrine, theology, or teaching on the clear words of Scripture in order to bring more people through the doors. The church can never use false doctrine in order to meet people where they are at. Steve Koelpin expresses this “counter-productive,” but non-negotiable stance of our synod on God’s inerrant word. “Rick (Johnson) and I have asked each other. We’re doing the same things that other churches are doing, and yet our growth is a fraction of other churches. Why is that? It comes back to the message. The message of law and gospel is offensive to people. They don’t understand it, so they don’t want to hear it.”<sup>76</sup>

Although Paul showed a willingness to change his style and approach to best reach the people he was evangelizing (1 Corinthians 9:22), in his letter to the young pastor Timothy, Paul

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<sup>74</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 198.

<sup>75</sup> Free, interview.

<sup>76</sup> Koelpin, interview.

makes it clear that the church is to preach the Word of God, not just to encourage people, but also to rebuke and correct when necessary. Rather than simply preaching a message to placate those who will not “put up with sound doctrine,” who simply want to scratch their itching ears with a moralistic, feel good message, Paul makes it clear that the church is to teach the truth of the Word of God (2 Timothy 2:2-5). Not adding anything to or subtracting anything from the clear law and gospel which God speaks to us in his holy Word (Deuteronomy 4:2).

### **Blessing Five--Multi-site is a Practical, Efficient Way to Reach More People with the Gospel in a Wider Area, with Fewer Resources**

While the four preceding benefits of multi-site are wonderful blessings from God, the greatest blessing and impetus for wide range implementation of multi-site is that multi-site will allow the WELS and its churches to reach more people with the gospel in a larger geographic area, in a practical, efficient manner. For example, Rick Warren’s megachurch, Saddleback, reaches an average of 23,000 people per weekend. This is a massive number of people hearing Warren’s message in Saddleback’s parish area. However, imagine how much larger of an area Saddleback could reach if this one megachurch was broken up into 230 churches of 100 people, and those congregations were spread out across a large geographic region covering multiple states. The initial number of people would be the same, but in the process, Saddleback would reach out in cities all across the country which wouldn’t have had the chance to step foot onto Saddleback’s one campus otherwise.<sup>77</sup> By widening and expanding our synod’s reach into areas which otherwise might go untouched, a larger number of people can be transformed by the power of the gospel and brought to faith by the work of the Holy Spirit.

No Christian congregation should deny that their goal as a church is to reach out to the world with the gospel. Jesus’ final command to his followers before his ascension in the Great Commission was to do just that. Jesus tells every Christian church that their mission is to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

The number of unchurched unbelievers who need to hear the gospel in every town and city around the country is vast, and that number grows daily. According to the latest research,

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<sup>77</sup> Kruschel, interview.

there are over 100 million unchurched people in the United States.<sup>78</sup> While a church is able to reach out to the unchurched in a limited area --their parish area—huge numbers of unchurched people also live outside that parish area. Pastor Dave Browning of Christ the King Community Church in Seattle, WA explains how the multi-site model can ease this “needing to be in many places at once” tension.

Christ the King determined that if our goal was to effectively reach out to thousands of unchurched people in the valley, we would have to do it in more than one place. We began establishing worship centers here, there, and everywhere. McDonald’s has sold billions of hamburgers. How many could they have sold if they had remained in one location?<sup>79</sup>

Very few, if any, WELS churches have been able to expand their reach to thousands of people in their state like Christ the King has been able to. But Crown of Life, with sites in Corona, Beaumont, and Riverside, CA, is a great example of a WELS church expanding their reach through the use of a multi-site model. The original site in Corona was able to expand its reach into the community by twenty miles when they added a site in the city of Riverside. Crown of Life extended its reach into the greater Los Angeles community by over forty miles with a third site in the city of Beaumont. As Pastor Rick Johnson explains, “Crown of Life is on one edge of a region in Southern California called the Inland Empire, which has about 4.5 million people--almost as many as the state of Wisconsin. That means there are lots of souls for whom Jesus died that we didn't even have a chance to reach out to.”<sup>80</sup> Obviously, three sites will not allow Crown of Life to touch all 4.5 million people of the Inland Empire with the gospel. But by adding sites across a geographic area, the church’s parish area expands greatly. Five congregations, each covering an area of twenty square miles, can cover far more ground and reach more people than one congregation covering even forty square miles.

Multi-site is a practical, efficient way to cover more ground and reach more people. Again, thinking back to the high cost of purchasing land in the Los Angeles area, the cost and resources from the budget that would be needed to plant two more completely new church

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<sup>78</sup> Warren Bird, “More Than 100 Million Unchurched in the United States?” Leadership Network, [http://leadnet.org/more\\_than\\_100\\_million\\_unchurched\\_in\\_the\\_united\\_states/](http://leadnet.org/more_than_100_million_unchurched_in_the_united_states/) (accessed February 4, 2014).

<sup>79</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 39-40.

<sup>80</sup> Johnson, interview.

buildings to cover forty miles of ground would cost millions of dollars. To expand by forty miles by adding two new sites cost only thousands. Multi-site congregations also generally require less man power and resources. As Pastor Peter Kruschel points out,

Multi-site works especially well in our conservative Lutheran church, because you don't need a lot of people to use the model. Most of our churches will never reach the Rick Warren Saddleback size to be a megachurch. But you can have multi-site churches supporting two or three pastors even in groups of forty or fifty people; one hundred or one hundred twenty-five people. We can reach people in places we'd overlook if we weren't using multi-site. We can plant more churches with fewer resources and reach more people with the Gospel. We can use this model to reach as many places as possible without needing as much man power or money, so we can reach out faster and further using this model.<sup>81</sup>

That speed and efficiency are intriguing blessings of this model. Many church plants spend months, or even years, waiting for construction or approval from city hall. Many face the frustrations and limitations of land-locked property and battles with city officials. Jumping through these hoops can cause lengthy delays in a church's ability to share Jesus with their community. With multi-site, our synod can extend their reach faster and further. As Jason Ewart says, "We can walk into any community with about \$100,000, fifty people on a launch team, turn the key and go, and have a church firing on all cylinders right out of the gate. There's so much potential in that."<sup>82</sup>

Multi-site also potentially allows pastors to reallocate their work hours to focus more on evangelism through resource sharing between the congregations of a multi-site church. While there will be differences in the ministry context of each congregation which will need to be considered, there are a number of possible resources that can be produced and shared between the sites. For example, in a multi-site church with multiple pastors, worship can be planned in sermon series which allow for alternating weeks between sites. Pastor A can then preach his sermon at site A one week, and preach the same sermon at site B the next week, while Pastor B does the reverse. With this swapping, each pastor can potentially save themselves twenty or more hours in the second week since they do not have to write a new sermon. The pastors can then focus those extra twenty hours to carry out other ministry tasks. The same could be used for

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<sup>81</sup> Kruschel, interview.

<sup>82</sup> Ewart, interview.

writing Bible classes, Catechism classes, and worship planning. This also allows the pastor with greater gifts in worship planning to take care of worship for both sites, while the pastor with the greater gifts in education can prepare the Bible studies for both sites. Certainly, each pastor would still be responsible to faithfully carry out the tasks and responsibilities of the sites he oversees and pastors, but pulpit swapping and resource sharing allow him to focus even more on evangelism to the lost in the parish area, and the nurture of the souls in his care. These are just a few examples of the many ways in which associates in a multi-site church can make the most effective, efficient use of their ministry hours.

Although multi-site presents numerous opportunities and a multitude of blessings, we still remember that “the primary reason for going multi-site is reaching those far from God.”<sup>83</sup> I’m not promising that a church which plants multiple sites across a wide geographic region is going to always bring in more baptisms or adult confirmations. However, the further our churches can reach with the means of grace, the more opportunities the Holy Spirit has to carry out his powerful work of creating and strengthening faith.

Multi-site implementation allows a church to expand its reach in a quick, practical, and efficient manner. Pastor Peter Kruschel sums up the vision well. “The whole goal is to reach as many people as possible with the Gospel, and be the Gospel to as many people as possible. That’s the best reason for multi-site. We don’t care about land and buildings. That’s secondary. We just want to reach more and more people with the gospel.”<sup>84</sup> Multi-site allows us to reach out to a larger number of those 100 million lost souls, people starving for the gospel. That is a wonderful blessing.

As was shown in the previous sections, the multi-site model can have an immensely valuable impact on, and be a great blessing to our synod. The opportunities and the possible blessings of wider range implementation of the multi-site model are many, and the possibilities are very exciting in my mind. My recommendation is not that our synod implements multi-site churches everywhere, or in every congregation. As was expressed, the ministry context needs to be right in a number of aspects and areas for multi-site to be “properly applied.” The model is

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<sup>83</sup> Tomberlin, *125 Tips for MultiSite Churches*, Loc.76.

<sup>84</sup> Kruschel, interview.

not a quick fix, or a universal solution to the “problems” in the church. However, I think the blessings are too many to not at least strongly consider, analyze, and examine whether multi-site could be used in certain areas and churches to expand the reach of the gospel through our WELS churches. That is not to say that there are no challenges that come along with implementation of multi-site church planting. In order to give a proper analysis, the challenges need to be weighed with the blessings and with the clear words of Scripture.

### **The Challenges of Multi-site Implementation in WELS**

When I initially wrote the interview questions about multi-site ministry for synod officials and pastors, one of my questions was, “What are the biggest negatives of multi-site church planting?” When I posed that question to Pastor Jason Ewart, he responded, “Generally, there are no negatives. There are definitely challenges that you face, but they’re challenges which will make your church better overall.”<sup>85</sup> After that interview, I changed the question. There are a number of possible challenges in multi-site implementation, just as there are challenges in any form of church planting. As with the blessings, I have narrowed the list to five challenges. I will analyze those challenges, showing how the challenges of multi-site can become blessings for our synod, and how scriptural support validates facing these challenges to bring about blessings for the church.

#### **Challenge One—Multi-site Requires Solid Leadership and Congregational Buy-in**

A plane will not fly without wings, and it will not get very far without fuel. As was discussed earlier, a multi-site church may have difficulty effectively and efficiently reaching out to the lost without strong leaders, and without full congregational buy-in to multi-site. That’s not to say that the work and power of the Holy Spirit depends on the church and its leaders. As Martin Luther prayed in his sacristy prayer, “God, use me as your instrument—but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ewart, interview.

<sup>86</sup> James Kellerman, “A Sacristy Prayer by Martin Luther,” Project Wittenberg, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/prayers/sacristy.txt> (accessed February 4, 2014).

Certainly, the success of the church does not depend on pastors, lay people, or ministry styles. And yet, God has called the people of the church to be his messengers. He has entrusted the precious treasure of the gospel to fragile jars of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7). As Jesus told his disciples before his ascension, he also tells his church, “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). Therefore, a church must faithfully analyze and examine its strengths and weaknesses in order to determine the most faithful course in carrying God’s Word to the world.

“The strength of any organization, whether a church or a business, is greatly influenced by the strength of the leader. In a multi-site church, these leadership needs are intensified and expanded.”<sup>87</sup> Certainly, in a church context, we can’t place the credit for the strength of a church on its pastor or leadership team. The strength of a church is always derived from God and the blessings he bestows on his church through Word and sacrament. Yet, the leadership of a congregation plays a large role from a human standpoint in the strength of a church. Because multi-site is a relatively unknown concept in most WELS congregations, the pastor and leadership of the church must guide and motivate their congregation. Keith Free states that a multi-site church “must have a real strong leadership team with a well laid out plan. They also must be able to stand strong if there’s pushback. The need is there for tremendous lay leadership, and a strong support group.”<sup>88</sup>

I’ll define strong leadership this way: A strong leadership team in a church will be able to practice four different aspects of transformational servant leadership. First of all, the leadership team will mind the mission. This means they will remain focused on the mission which God has mapped out for his Church: to reach out to the lost with the gospel. The leadership team will proclaim, emphasize, and articulate this mission to the congregation, in order to instill into them the zeal for that mission through God’s Word, as a portion of the priesthood of all believers. The mission of the Church is the mission of God’s people also.

The leadership team will then motivate the manpower of the congregation by passionately and frequently proclaiming and driving home the mission. Along with this

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<sup>87</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip*, 188.

<sup>88</sup> Free, interview.

passionate articulation, the leadership team will also teach, train, and equip the manpower with the resources and knowledge necessary to carry out the mission of the Church.

Next, the leadership team, having articulated the mission and motivated the people with Word and training, will engage the priesthood of all believers by asking, “How should we now proceed?” This step involves the congregation looking at the mission and their ministry context, and analyzing what steps could be taken by them in order to carry out the Church’s mission. This step allows the members to see the mission as their own, not just as the mission of their church or their pastor. If the mission and vision belong to the members, then there will be buy-in and trust.

Finally, the pastor and leadership team will tend the flock. This means more than simply fattening the flock on the grass of received ministry. Leaders train the flock, develop the flock, and mentor the flock so that they too can assist in the task of tending and reclaiming sheep. A Christian leader will also work hard to help all of the souls in his spiritual care to see the bigger ministry picture. The leadership team will help the flock see the mission of God and care more about the needs of others.<sup>89</sup>

The pastor and leaders must earn the members’ trust by showing their love and care for the members and the mission. If members see their pastor and leaders are willing to do anything for them and the mission, members will be willing to follow their leaders into uncertain situations. The leadership team must be good strategic planners, analyzing and planning both for short term and long term ministry and congregational nurture, how to best carry out the mission of the Church. There should at least be a good mix of both leaders and managers; leaders to articulate the mission and excite the people to follow it, and managers to take the vision and craft it into a plan moving forward.

Multi-site also requires lay leadership and volunteerism. Without complete buy-in from the membership to do whatever is necessary to plant sites, the sites could flounder and die. Scott McConnell warns, “It’s essential for the core group to buy in to the new site as their church home, not just a temporary place of service.”<sup>90</sup> If the mission of the church is to reach out to as

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<sup>89</sup> Adapted from class notes from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Pastoral Leadership class, taught by Prof. E. Allen Sorum

<sup>90</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc.1455.



many of the lost as possible, then the task cannot fall entirely on the pastor and the leadership team, or the church will fail to carry out its vision. The congregation must buy in to doing many hours of friendship evangelism, door hanging, canvassing, and surveying in order to reach the unchurched and unbelievers with the powerful gospel message.

This is a challenge because of the sinful nature. The leadership team will not always agree on the direction the church should go. The membership will not all be excited and zealous to implement a model that forces them to be more active in their church than just showing up for worship and then sipping coffee with friends after the service. How can this challenge be faced? With the proper motivation, a church is able to turn this challenge into a blessing.

“There needs to be a driving force behind going multi-site. Success comes because of a driving by the Great Commission. Your motivation impacts how you measure success. Every church that is focused on the Great Commission is not called to be a multi-site church, but every multi-site church should be driven by an evangelistic passion.”<sup>91</sup> As Scott McConnell points out, the Great Commission of Jesus to all of his followers is the driving force that will motivate a leadership team and a congregation to buy in to multi-site. “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). The church is motivated and driven by a passion to proclaim the gospel to those who do not know their Savior. The members are motivated and driven because it is what their Savior has commanded of them. The church is comforted and assured that God will always be with his church, to the very end of the age, in all they do.

That same motivation will drive a leadership team--the pastors, as well as any other executive committee and board members--to thoroughly examine their gifts and their vision, to see if they are the proper leaders to carry out this vision and to lead the congregation in this model to carry out the Great Commission. As Scott McConnell says, not every church that is focused on the Great Commission has to be a multi-site church, but every multi-site church needs to be focused entirely on the Great Commission.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc. 130.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

What a blessing to know that the Holy Spirit is at work with synodical officials to call and assign pastors who have the right zeal and gifts to lead and direct a multi-site church. Rather than worrying about whether the lead pastor has selected the right person to fill the role of campus pastor, our churches can be confident that the Holy Spirit has selected the right man to accomplish God's will.

For pastors contemplating planting another site of their church, it is important for that shepherd to examine himself to see if he is the right kind of leader with the proper gifts to pastor a multi-site church. This is not always an easy thing for a pastor to do. But as Pastor Steve Koelpin said, "As long as the pastor and people are putting the kingdom first, and putting themselves last, it can work. A lot of congregations and guys don't get that or do that."<sup>93</sup>

With strong leadership in place and congregational buy-in, motivated by Christ's commission to spread the gospel to all nations, the Holy Spirit can produce evangelistic passion in the leaders and members through the Word. God will then use that leadership and mission zeal to greatly bless his kingdom and to proclaim the gospel to those living in darkness. In the following section, I will expand and offer some ways forward for garnering congregational buy-in.

### **Challenge Two—Multi-site Requires Members to Change Priorities and Expand Vision Beyond Themselves**

The evidence is strong in today's society. Advertisements hone in on it. Hollywood's elite and the sporting world's top athletes daily remind us. The world today is very much "all about me." Society constantly searches for what will make life easier and better. The priorities of the world most often focus inward, rather than outward. Living in a sinful world means that the members of a multi-site congregation will also perpetually battle Satan, who will try to draw their focus on "what is best for me" rather than "what is best for the kingdom." Since a multi-site church needs to constantly focus on taking the gospel to the world rather than keeping it tightly locked within the church doors, selfishness is a challenge that all multi-site churches will face.

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<sup>93</sup> Koelpin, interview.

That first task in that battle is for the pastor to inspire proper mission zeal in the congregation. Obviously, the primary motivator is the Great Commission and the many sections in the Bible where Jesus commands his church to take the message to the world. Being lights to shine in the world, members will be shown the necessity of letting their light shine before other people; not to put the light of the lamp under a bowl, but to spread its light before all people! (Matthew 5:14-16). The attitudes, priorities, and vision of the church need to be guided to care outwardly for the world, rather than to care only about the self. As Rick Johnson said, one of the necessities of a multi-site church is “a willingness on the part of the people to see the church as bigger than the service or campus they attend. They need to have a mission mindset.”<sup>94</sup>

The only way to change hearts is with God’s Word. Only through the work of the Holy Spirit can self-focusing barriers be broken down. Only through the Word can hearts be changed. Therefore, the pastor will keep that truth as a constant focus in his sermons, Bible studies, prayers, and every platform in which he touches his people with the Word. Certainly, that is not to say the pastor should completely abandon the spiritual care and nurture of those who are already inside the walls of the church. That is also the task God has given to spiritual shepherds. The congregation must be reminded that they belong to the priesthood of all believers. They must be reminded of the words Peter spoke, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). As a royal priesthood of believers, the people’s attitude, as a thankful response to God’s grace, should drive them to declare his praises to those who still dwell in the darkness of sin and unbelief.

That attitude is shaped and formed not just from the pulpit and classroom. It is also formed on the streets, projected as the driving force in the life of the pastor and leadership team of the church. If the pastor does not go on outreach calls, does not follow up on worship visitors, does not study his community, or plan trips to evangelize the neighborhood, the members cannot be expected to put reaching out to the lost as their top priority either. Unless the pastor projects and reflects the overall mission of the church--to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth--in his own life and ministry, those attitudes and priorities will rarely be found in his people either.

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<sup>94</sup> Johnson, interview.

The pastor must also encourage his members to shift their attitudes and priorities off of themselves by providing them with resources to do outreach and evangelism to the community. Quality invitation business cards with the church's logo, service times, and locations, or with invitations to a special event, sermon series, or Bible study can instill an outward-looking passion and attitude in members. As the members are able to do evangelism by simply handing a business card to a friend, co-worker, or random person they're talking to in line at the grocery store, their confidence and zeal can grow. Seeing the fruits of their labor when one of the people they reached out to visits church for worship is a spark that can cause a heart to burst into flame with mission zeal. The pastor must also provide training for his people by mentoring them in evangelism, and by being an example of evangelism for the congregation. With this training, members can feel as comfortable as possible in carrying out the mission of the church.

A pastor will have to lead people to look past themselves and look at God's perspective. The Old Adam still reigns, and so it's easy to make it "my church," "my pew," and to worry about things like "why did we pick that carpet color?"<sup>95</sup> It is not easy for anyone to put others first and themselves last. Yet, it is incredibly important that this happen not just in multi-site churches, but in all God's kingdom. As Keith Free states, "We need friendly, caring people who genuinely care about souls; that aren't just worried about the conversations with their buddies or their coffee. When visitors come, they're intentionally making new folks feel welcome. It can be done the right way, but I've seen it done the other way."<sup>96</sup>

This is a challenge that is not easily overcome. In fact, it is a challenge that can never be fully won this side of heaven. As Rick Johnson shows, even once a multi-site church is up and running and the people have bought in with changed attitudes, there will still be selfish attitudes in a church of sinners. "We did, and still do sometimes, experience a bit of selfish interest on the part of some. The Old Adam is still in Christians in a multi-site setting too. What really brought

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<sup>95</sup> Ewart, interview.

<sup>96</sup> Free, interview.

resistance was the necessity to change service times. We actually lost five families who didn't have the church's overall mission as their mindset.”<sup>97</sup>

A church looking to implement multi-site must ask itself, “Are we willing as a group of churches to put ourselves out for the sake of the gospel of Jesus and others? I don't mean just giving money for missions but in actually doing the work, inconveniencing ourselves, seeing our friends go off to a different campus even though it is the same church.”<sup>98</sup> If a congregation can answer that question with a resounding yes; if their pastor and their leadership team can constantly break down the barriers in the hearts of themselves and their people through the word; if the pastor can model that zeal and provide the resources to help make priority one reaching out to the lost, then a multi-site congregation can have amazing impact on a world longing for the gospel. “Imagine the power of a church not built around a personality or a facility, but instead built around a mission!”<sup>99</sup> Built on the rock of Christ, faith, and the Word, rather than on the sinking sands of self, the church can accomplish its mission (Matthew 7:24-29).

### **Challenge Three—Dealing with Opposition or Distrust from Fellow WELS People**

Not everyone sees the multi-site movement as a model filled with potential blessings. A number of people see it as a model ripe with pitfalls and negative consequences. In the book *Franchising McChurch*, pastors Thomas White and John Yeats discuss the negative influences that multi-site, in their minds, will have on the church.

While this mentality produces success, if measuring by numbers, the model feeds the consumer mentality. By most standards, this model has achieved success, but by offering additional styles or products, individualism is encouraged, and consumerism is reinforced. You become a religious consumer simply seeking to have it your way. One has to stop and ask what this practice will do to the next generation of congregants.<sup>100</sup>

As mentioned before, the multi-site model is a relatively new, unknown concept in the WELS. Although multi-site has found vast implementation in other denominations and non-denominational churches, the WELS--other than a few scattered churches—has not done much

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<sup>97</sup> Johnson, interview.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 200.

<sup>100</sup> White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 143.

implementation or in-depth research on multi-site. The concept is new and uncertain. Therefore, a number of WELS churches, pastors, and officials are leery of the model, questioning the validity and wisdom of implementing multi-site. Combining the seemingly small amount of knowledge our synod as a whole possesses about multi-site, and the wide range implementation this model is finding in other denominations causes many people to doubt or question multi-site.

That is not a bad thing. In WELS circles, we often reference the “narrow Lutheran middle.” This is the concept that there is a proper middle ground between two extremes. Both extreme alternatives place an overemphasis on one alternative at the expense of the other, like a road running in the middle of two deep ditches.<sup>101</sup> One ditch on the side of the road, when it comes to the church, is to implement a model because that model is new and popular, without any investigation and analysis of the model’s merits or validity. The opposite ditch is to shut out any possible considerations of a model simply because it is different and non-traditional. Cautious investigation is good practice before jumping in with both feet, as long as that investigation is carried out with an open mind and without preconceived, unwarranted judgments.

However, in the WELS we must ask ourselves if too many people veer too often into the ditch of distrust, criticism, and critical questioning of motives because a model is new or different. Pastor Jason Ewart often faces questions and concerns from WELS pastors and members who do not understand the “new and different” model that Hope implements, with its heavily contemporary worship style and casual atmosphere. He sees that as one of the biggest challenges for wide range implementation of multi-site in WELS. “Specifically in WELS, we don’t do it that way. We get quite a bit of scrutiny here. People know we’re different, and that brings up questions from the extremely conservative areas. A big challenge is the need to communicate with the broader audience. Not that it’s a negative, but it is a challenge.”<sup>102</sup> How can a multi-site church explain and communicate to its fellow brothers and sisters elsewhere in the synod the reasoning behind this implementation?

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<sup>101</sup> Daniel Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle: Following the Scriptural Road* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011), 1-2.

<sup>102</sup> Ewart, interview.

First, as this paper has sought to do, the church's pastors and leadership team must be ready to show the blessings and benefits which God can provide to his church through the multi-site model, implemented in proper ministry contexts. There must be more evidence to back the usage of multi-site than just numerical success and results. The blessings, benefits, and results must also be backed with God's Word. Otherwise, critics can accuse a multi-site church of prioritizing methodology over the message; numbers of people over nurture of souls. "Don't overlook the essential foundation of helping people understand why you do church the way you do."<sup>103</sup>

Communication is a key to avoiding misunderstanding and criticism. A pastor can go a long ways towards deflecting criticism and garnering the trust and confidence of his ministry peers and members if he has a reasonable, logical explanation of why his model fits and works well in his church's ministry context. Certainly, there will be some who will still scoff and question a church, no matter how reasonable and fitting the explanation and support. But if the church has more reason to implement multi-site than "that is what everyone else is doing right now," most will value this model as another way that God can reach out to the lost through his church. Communicating from Scripture why the implementation of this model is not only acceptable, but also valuable, is of primary importance to ease doubts and questions.

Almost every book I read on the multi-site model, many written by Evangelical and Non-Denominational pastors, points to two sections of the Bible as the biblical support for multi-site church planting: Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 15. Some argue that the example of the early Christian church, as described in Acts 2, lays the biblical foundation for multi-campus churches.<sup>104</sup> Verses 44-47 are often cited as an example of a multi-site church, specifically pointing to the phrases "all the believers were together and had everything in common" (Acts 2:44) as proof of the "one church" concept, and "they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:46) as proof of the one church meeting in many places, specifically multiple campuses or sites of the one Jerusalem church, which was meeting in many locations. Also, that "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47) is heralded as proof that this model was effective, and was granting blessings and growth to God's church.

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<sup>103</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip*, 208.

<sup>104</sup> White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 172-173.

Acts 15 is cited as another example of the New Testament believers implementing a multi-site church planting model. In Acts 15, some false teachers travel to the church in Antioch and begin to teach the Christians there, “Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved.” This was a fatal heresy, and so Paul and Barnabas sharply disputed with these false teachers who were trying to lead people away from Christ. However, Geoff Surratt sees this as an example of the logistical problems that can arise in multi-site.

Paul and Barnabas discovered some of the organizational challenges of a multi-campus church very early on, as reflected in Acts 15. The Jerusalem campus felt that the other congregations just weren’t doing things the way they were done at the “main campus,” so several self-appointed leaders headed to Antioch to straighten them out. Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other church members to go to Jerusalem to sort out this problem. At Jerusalem, they began working out organizational challenges, defining the essential DNA of the new church, and clarifying how best to communicate between the campuses.<sup>105</sup>

This is a faulty hermeneutic<sup>106</sup> to say the least. The interpreters cite descriptive passages<sup>107</sup> of the Bible and use them like prescriptive passages.<sup>108</sup> While it is debated by many whether Acts 2 even describes a multi-site model in the early Christian church,<sup>109</sup> even if the church in Jerusalem was following a model of what today might be considered multi-site church planting, it does not mean that multi-site is therefore the way churches ought to function today. There are no directives in Scripture how to do mission work. God does not prescribe how we should do church. He gives us guidelines to be sure we are following in ministry, and he gives descriptive examples of how churches in the past carried out their gospel ministry. Therefore, rather than making law out of what God has not prescribed, our hermeneutic should be to compare the values and core beliefs we hold, as God has given them to us in Scripture, with the model being analyzed. Instead of interpreting multi-site into a text that is not addressing multi-site, churches ought to find the biblical basis and support of multi-site by applying and

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<sup>105</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 140.

<sup>106</sup> A hermeneutic is a method or principle of interpretation

<sup>107</sup> Passages of the Bible which describe something which might be good or bad to emulate, but are not commanded by God for all people of all time to do or not do

<sup>108</sup> Passages which are instructive, commands of God of what should or should not be done by all people of all time

<sup>109</sup> White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 172-176.



comparing the church's values and core beliefs from Scripture with the multi-site ministry model. The church and its pastors then must examine their hearts and minds, and whether their ministry model applies to these truths.

The first priority to inspect is that the methodology is not trumping the message of the gospel. In any church, whether using a traditional or contemporary model, we must know that that church remains faithful to the core of the church, the message of law and gospel as clearly found in Scripture. The church's practices and models must conform to the Word of God. Following Paul's exhortations in 1 Corinthians 10:31, is the practice and model of the church "giving glory to God" in everything that it does? Is the model implemented meant to give glory to God, or to give glory and numerical success to the pastor and church? God's glory must be the motivation and impetus behind everything the church does.

As mentioned before, some churches preach a watered down message filled with decision theology and application intended to direct people how to live the best moral life possible here on earth, rather than breaking down the sinner with the law, and lifting them back up with the gospel. Some churches who preach this feel good message also implement multi-site church planting. This causes people to question the model's validity, and question its scriptural motives. But with solid, biblical teaching, multi-site can be used as a blessing to God's church. As Rick Johnson said, "We cannot copy the decision theology, even though it appeals to the natural man, because it is a false theology. We can, however, learn from their methodology to take the gospel to people instead of expecting people to come to the gospel. That is really the core idea in multi-site outreach."<sup>110</sup> Whatever the model, we must compare a church's practices with the core value of our synod, to remain committed to proclaiming the unconditional message of the gospel.

The church must make sure the doctrine being preached in their services and studies are in keeping with the clear words of Scripture, and focus on Christ. We follow the admonition of Paul to the Colossian Christians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:16-17).

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<sup>110</sup> Johnson, interview.

Due to the lack of directives on how to do mission work and to carry out the Great Commission, there is room for Christian freedom to be used. As Paul told the Corinthians, “Everything is permissible—but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (1 Corinthians 10:23-24). Therefore, with this freedom in mind, the question is not “Can we use this model faithfully?” but, “Is this model wise, constructive, beneficial, and for the good of others and God’s church?” After looking at the blessings of multi-site implementation, it becomes clear that the model, when properly applied, can be beneficial, constructive, and for the good of others, as the reach of the gospel spreads farther and wider. The final hurdle then to be cleared is whether the model is wise. I believe that decision comes down to each church knowing their ministry context, studying it carefully, analyzing their church’s gifts and abilities, and comparing it with the blessings and challenges multi-site can produce. If the church can follow those steps and view multi-site to be a wise way of carrying the gospel to the world, then they can proceed prayerfully with full confidence.

After all, as Rick Johnson said, “Do we really need any more allowance or permission to do mission work? Here's some from Acts 1:8; ‘You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.’ Now, translate that to contemporary terms; in Corona, in Beaumont, in Riverside and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>111</sup> With a mission mindset and gospel motivation as the core, joined with solid law/gospel preaching and personal shepherding of the souls in a congregation, multi-site is simply an extension of the Great Commission that Jesus gives to his church. Multi-site is all about the 2,000 year-old challenge of reaching people and making disciples, just with a different wrapper on the package.<sup>112</sup>

Cautious investigation of a new or unknown model is good and faithful practice to help ensure that our synod never looks past its core values and beliefs of staying true to God’s Word and carrying the grace, love, and mercy of Christ to the world. Blatant mistrust and criticism without investigation or asking questions is not good practice, but rather causes separation, anger, and mistrust among the body of believers. It is the job of the pastor to communicate with the nearby and neighboring WELS pastors and churches and explain to them why this model is

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<sup>111</sup> Johnson, Interview.

<sup>112</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Road Trip*, 18.

being implemented.<sup>113</sup> Often, when the explanation is logical and matches with Scripture, people will rejoice in the variety of ways which God can carry out his work.

However, there are still some people who will criticize, look down on, and mistrust that church--even with proper explanation and communication carried out--because it is different, new, and not the style they are used to. This is legalism. Since God gave no directives on how to carry out mission work, there is freedom among the churches to determine which model is best applied to a ministry context. Legalism is still legalism, even if its intended purpose is the assumed “defense” of the gospel. “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity” (Psalm 133:1).

#### **Challenge Four—How Will the Leadership Work?**

Generally, in a single church, the leadership model is not overly complex. There is a pastor or two, an executive committee or a council, some elders, with the adult male members of the congregation serving as voters. Yet, when the church begins multiplying its ministry by adding sites, the leadership and oversight becomes far more complex to determine. Does the pastor of the original campus become the lead pastor of the whole church, or will multiple pastors share that role? Will there be an executive committee, made up of men from all of the sites which oversee the work of all the different sites? Will each site have its own council or board to make decisions for that site, and then join together with the councils of the other sites to make decisions that apply to the church as a whole? Will the original campus make all the decisions, and the other sites have to follow those regulations?

Most often, when a church expands to multiple sites, the church will appoint one pastor to become the lead pastor and oversee the whole church. This is usually the pastor who started the church, or at least had the vision to lead his church to multi-site. Then, depending on how many sites the church has, there are a number of campus pastors who answer to the lead pastor, and oversee a site of the church. Serving under the campus pastors are the other staff, such as youth directors, worship directors, or discipleship directors.<sup>114</sup> The staff will meet together for weekly or monthly meetings and collaborate to work together for the church as a whole. The

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<sup>113</sup> Free, interview.

<sup>114</sup> For a flow chart of this leadership model, see Appendix B

oversight, decision making, and approval fall in the hands of the lead pastor and campus pastors, however.

There are not many current WELS multi-site churches which have expanded beyond one or two off site campuses, or with more than two pastors. This smaller size, although still difficult at times, is not quite as complex as many of the larger multi-site churches across the country. Yet, if multi-site gains wide range implementation in WELS as I am recommending, the need to figure out how more complex networks of leadership work will arise. For the time being, the leadership model at the three site/two pastor church, Crown of Life in Corona, will give an example of how a multi-site leadership team might look.

The board at Crown of Life, in addition to the two pastors, church president, and treasurer, include members from each of the three sites who fill leadership roles. The board includes an outreach coordinator, fellowship coordinator, and compassion coordinator from each of the three sites, so that each individual site has members on the board and has a say in things.<sup>115</sup>

While it is possible to have a lead pastor who oversees everything and makes all the decisions for the whole church, I do not find this model to be beneficial or wise. This kind of model “gives the local congregation zero control. In function then, the multi-campus church is like a hierarchical denomination that dictates what each franchise must do.”<sup>116</sup>

The Crown of Life model gives each site or congregation a stronger voice, as each site has some decision making rights and votes in the working of the whole church. This allows each congregation to retain an independent identity, while still achieving success by working together with all of the other sites of the church.<sup>117</sup> Yet, each multi-site church must evaluate their context, pastors, leaders, and members, to determine what leadership model best fits their church.

However, according to the conducted interviews, the biggest challenge in multi-site churches is not determining which leadership model best fits the church, but rather, how two or

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<sup>115</sup> Koelpin, interview.

<sup>116</sup> White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 81.

<sup>117</sup> McConnell, *Multi-Site Churches*, Loc. 794.

more pastors will be able to work together and function as a team. Pastor Keith Free spoke of the challenges of “pastors and staff working together.”<sup>118</sup> Pastor Rick Johnson said his biggest personal challenge when implementing multi-site “has been to share the pastoral ministry with another pastor. Honestly, I really liked being the only pastor, but I suppose that also is an attitude issue.”<sup>119</sup> His associate, Pastor Steve Koelpin echoed, “There are initial struggles with multiple pastors and trying to be efficient. There’s a learning curve. He’s the brains, he’s older, and he’s been around longer. I just need to shut up and listen. Now, I’m learning a lot. And yet he’s starting to let me do what I’m good at. He’s delegating, and letting me make more decisions.”<sup>120</sup>

Differing opinions, bravado, and the sinful nature often cause issues for sharing the ministry reins of a church, especially a multi-site church with different people and different contexts at each site. Some pastors are cut out for being an associate, while others struggle with it. The benefit of this is the ability to let that be a well-known fact for calling committee or the assignment committee, that a man who is able and willing to work together with another pastor is a necessity in filling this call as a multi-site pastor. Even with a man in place who has these gifts and attitudes, there will still be issues. Pastor Steve Koelpin gives sound advice to associates in any ministry setting. “There are many associate pastor relationships in our circles that are absolutely toxic. The ministry suffers because of that. So pastors need to make a decision to be upfront and honest right from the start, because it’s not about us. It’s about the kingdom.”<sup>121</sup>

#### **Challenge Five—Will There Be Disconnect between the Shepherd and His Sheep?**

Another challenge of multi-site ministry is the question of whether the pastor will still be able to hold a close, personal relationship with his people when he is preaching at multiple sites and multiple services every weekend. Even with multiple pastors, if the pastors are doing pulpit swapping between the sites every couple of weeks, does that changing and swapping stifle the ability for a pastor to connect and personally know his people? Geoff Surratt advises what he believes is the answer to this challenge of multi-site:

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<sup>118</sup> Free, interview.

<sup>119</sup> Johnson, interview.

<sup>120</sup> Koelpin, interview.

<sup>121</sup> Koelpin, interview.

Not that many live teaching pastors know their people personally anyways! What matters it seems, is not so much that the preacher knows me personally as that the teacher's message is biblically sound, applied in a way I can understand. Then hopefully the church has altar counselors, Sunday school teachers, youth group leaders, or other on-site people to help disciple those who respond to the message. That's where the personal relationship is needed, through campus pastors and the teams they oversee.<sup>122</sup>

Surratt is responding here to the accusation that using a video venue model causes a disconnect between the preacher and people, since the preaching pastor is not really at the site, but is actually just relaying his message via live streamed video or by DVD. However, even applying his words to a site with live preaching, it is easy to see what the role of the pastor should be in his mind. The pastor is responsible for preaching a biblically sound, understandable, enticing message every Sunday, and the work of pastoring the congregation the rest of the week falls on the non-seminary trained campus pastors and other staff members.

Is that the only role God wants pastors to perform, to preach on Saturday or Sunday, but not nourish the souls of his church's sheep the rest of the week? When Christ reinstated Peter after the resurrection, his command was not only to preach. Rather, Jesus told him, "Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17). The role of the pastor is more than just to feed people with the word. Pastoral ministry also involves spiritual care for the members of the flock as well.

Pastor Steve Koelpin addresses how Crown of Life addresses the possible disconnect between shepherd and sheep:

Some sites do a video feed, and people never really see the pastor. We're different. We value the importance of having a live pastor there, someone you can talk to afterwards, and put a face with a name. We do pulpit swapping between the two pastors at the three sites. This saves time, but still allows us to get to meet and know the people on others campuses. But each pastor still has their "area" where they live, shepherd, and do counseling the rest of the week. That way, people can say, "You're my pastor." But you're still involved in the lives of both congregations. It's a huge benefit and blessing, and people like that.<sup>123</sup>

It is a challenge and a difficulty that pastors in a multi-site church will face, whether the church has one pastor or three. Pastor Koelpin admits, "With two pastors and four services, there

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<sup>122</sup> Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip*, 204.

<sup>123</sup> Koelpin, interview.

isn't always enough time to get to know your people and to build deep relationships with them as much as you'd want. It's frustrating at times."<sup>124</sup> Yet, it is still very possible to have a multi-site church and have personal connection with the people at each site. That personal care and relationship is not always possible in larger churches where it is nearly impossible for the pastor to personally know every member. With the smaller congregation size at each site, even with multiple campuses, the pastor has a chance to get to know each person and built a relationship and rapport with them. As was described before, the multi-site pastor needs to be motivated and able to do some hard work, but hard work which is a blessing to the church and to God's kingdom.

That is one characteristic of WELS pastors that sets them apart from many others. It is one of the greatest strengths of our synod's pastors. An important emphasis is placed on being in the lives of the people. It is not just about preaching and then going back into some green room. They are there to care, shepherd, and nourish their flock.<sup>125</sup>

With multiple sites, there is also the concern that although all of the sites combine to make one church, the sites will remain separate and unable to connect and have fellowship with the brothers and sisters in their church who attend other sites. This is not just a challenge for multi-site churches, but one that all churches face. If a church includes a thousand members who attend three different services, the ability for everyone to connect is limited to events outside of Sunday morning worship. In any ministry context, if proactive action is not taken to present church members with opportunities to enjoy fellowship and grow closer to their brothers and sisters in Christ, people will not.

Therefore, it is equally necessary for multi-site churches to have events and fellowship activities that bring members from all the sites and campuses together for fellowship. For example, at Crown of Life, the board has fellowship coordinators from each site whose responsibility it is to come up with ideas and events to bring the members from all the sites together for fellowship. Every site has multiple fellowship events every year which members of all sites are invited to attend. At least twice a year, events are planned which bring all of the sites

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<sup>124</sup> Koelpin, interview.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

together. Whether for a church picnic or for a minor league baseball game, the emphasis and intentional planning is there to make sure all of the sites remember that they are one church with the other sites and to remain connected to those people. “We’re just trying to make sure that the members don’t view Crown of Life only through the lens of their own campus.”<sup>126</sup>

For the multi-site church meeting in rented facilities, the question of how you shepherd the members during the week can be tricky. Obviously, the church does not have a fellowship hall, sanctuary, classrooms, or offices to have mid-week Bible studies, Catechism classes, Bible Instruction Classes, fellowship gatherings, or counseling sessions besides when the church has the facility rented on Sunday mornings. How can a multi-site pastor shepherd his flock during the rest of the week?

Pastor Jason Ewart and the congregation of Hope have solved this problem by using a similar mindset as to their non-traditional worship practices. The church uses other non-traditional spaces. The church’s shepherding during the week is centered on small group Bible studies, which meet in members’ homes, in coffee shops, in restaurants, and in whatever other spaces can be used. This is also a way for small groups to have fellowship together. Counseling, and other “office” work can be accomplished by renting small office space in a separate building to give the pastor a place to have an office and hold office hours. Much of the Bible Instruction Class and counseling can be done “in-home” as well.

It makes sense. Most business meetings now take place at restaurants or coffee shops. When families gather together, they generally do it in the homes of their family or friends. Why not use a similar tactic for the shepherding that a church does the rest of the week, bringing people together in spaces that feel comfortable or familiar to people? Sometimes this environment helps to build better fellowship, and seems more inviting to visitors without a church background.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The multi-site church planting model is not perfect. It is not easy. It is not a quick fix to solve any problems that a church might have. The model does not require less work, but rather,

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<sup>126</sup> Koelpin, interview.



more work from the pastors and members. Multi-site requires buy-in from all involved. It requires self-sacrifice on the part of the members and staff. There are many layers of questions that must be analyzed and applied to each individual church to determine if its ministry context is properly fitting for multi-site implementation. Yet, my prayer is that through this paper it became clearer that the multi-site model, although challenging, can bring about many blessings for the kingdom of God. Through interviews with those who have implemented multi-site in their churches, or who have studied the model extensively, it becomes clear that there are wonderful blessings and potential in store for the multi-site model in the WELS, when properly applied.

By reading the research and findings of other church bodies in regards to multi-site, it is evident that, when implemented with the proper motivation, in the right contexts, and combined with solid law-gospel preaching and teaching, the model can also expand the reach of our synod as we follow the Great Commission in taking the gospel to all the ends of the earth.

I am not recommending that the WELS should implement multi-site church planting in every congregation. Nor do I recommend that multi-site become the wave of the future for home missions. I have remained impartial regarding whether I think multi-site or traditional church planting is the method our synod should use. This impartiality is intentional, because the question is not an either/or question. Multi-site will be best implemented when used in combination with and complementary to the traditional church planting the WELS has implemented in recent history. I echo the thoughts of Pastor Jason Ewart when he said,

I'm not saying multi-site is the best or the right model. But it does work well in any context, especially if there are other WELS churches around. A multi-site church can complement that church—not opening a school, not using exactly the same worship styles, and not duplicating their ministries. Rather, a multi-site should complement them, working hand in hand with those other churches, to reach out to the demographic of people who aren't being reached by the gospel.<sup>127</sup>

I also endorse the recommendations of Pastor Rick Johnson, who sees multi-site as a way for WELS to expand its reach with the gospel in areas that already have at least a small WELS footprint with other congregations nearby.

I think that synodical mission dollars should be used to start home missions in places where we don't have WELS churches nearby, and that cross-town mission starts, or same

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<sup>127</sup> Ewart, interview.

metro area starts should be done by the local church or churches. Why should we use mission dollars to start a another WELS site in Green Bay or La Crosse, Milwaukee or the Inland Empire of Southern California, when those churches could do the work and fund it as well? I vicared at Bethany in Manitowoc, WI years ago. There are four WELS churches in Manitowoc: First German, Bethany, Immanuel and Grace. First German daughtered the other three, calling and paying the pastor who started the work there while serving part time at the mother church. Isn't that awesome? We then can use Synod money to send home missionaries to the east coast, the deep south and other places where there are not WELS churches nearby.<sup>128</sup>

In areas where a WELS church or group of churches is growing and thriving, the funding and work of starting new sites can largely be done by those churches, saving the Synod thousands to millions of dollars. That money can then be used to start missions in rapidly expanding areas that are without a WELS footprint.

Even if the WELS board for home missions decides to give mission dollars towards multi-site implementation, “We can do a whole lot more by giving less money to more places. Let them grow organically, and not make them feel compelled to have to become a huge mega church with huge building.”<sup>129</sup>

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has been carrying out the Great Commission and taking the love of Christ all over the world for over 160 years without using multi-site church planting as more than a minor model used in certain areas of the country. I am not saying the Synod needs to reinvent the wheel or risk dying out. But with changing times and changing attitudes of people towards church, it is at least necessary to investigate and analyze different methods and styles of church planting to ensure that our church body is using efficient and effective ways to take the gospel to those who are in darkness. Whether their ministry context is ripe for the use of multi-site is up to the individual churches and to the synod as a whole.

We do not need to rush into implementing anything new, largely untested, or unexamined, nor should we. As Peter Kruschel recommends, “There are many implications and possibilities for usage at this place and time. If everyone uses it judiciously and seize the chances God places before us, it will grow naturally. Will that work? I don’t know. We’ll find out. There

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<sup>128</sup> Johnson, interview.

<sup>129</sup> Kruschel, interview.

are plenty of opportunities, but it is ok to move judiciously. There are still things we have yet to learn about multi-site.<sup>130</sup>

Having just scratched the surface of the many blessings which the multi-site church planting model could potentially bring to God's kingdom, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod should carefully, judiciously, and prayerfully look more deeply and proactively into implementing multi-site church planting in properly applied ministry contexts. This implementation can expand the reach of our churches, bringing the gospel to people where they are while maintaining our common values and faithfulness to the inerrant Word of God. Surely, the model or the method is not the driving force which brings lost souls to the light of Christ. God alone can bless the work of the church. Yet, it is the church's job to give God as many things as possible to bless. Multi-site church planting is one of those things God will bless for his church.

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<sup>130</sup> Kruschel, interview.

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## Appendix A-- Multi-Site Terminology

### Definition of Multi-Site Terms

**Multi-site church:** Short for multiple-site church, or one church with multiple locations. A church is considered multi-site if it has more than one worship venue, more than one campus, or a combination of both.

**Campus:** Any location where a complete church ministry (i.e., adult worship, nursery, children's programming) takes place. A multi-site church may have several campuses.

**Branch or satellite:** An off-site campus.

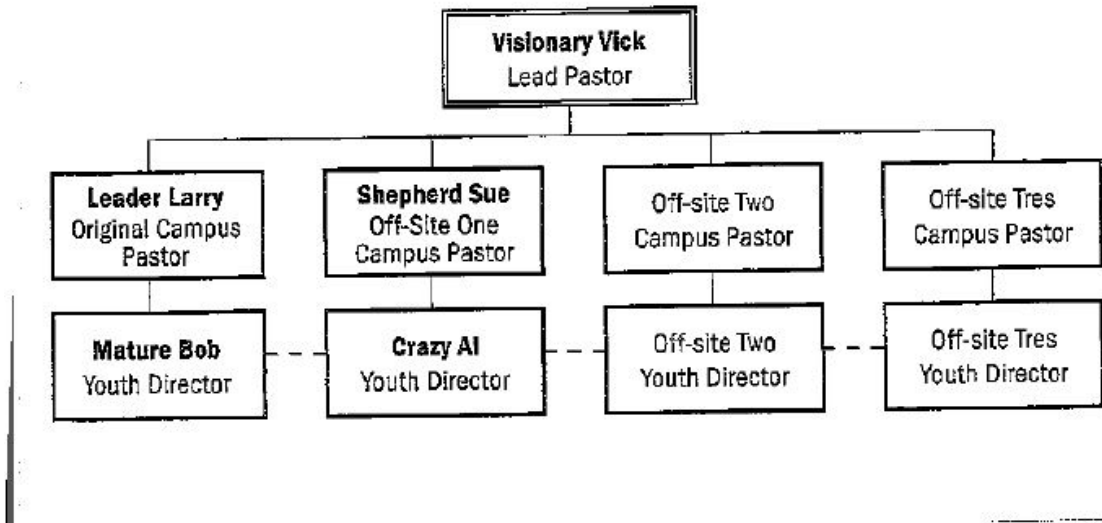
**Venue:** A location where a worship service for adults is held, such as a church's fellowship hall, gym, or chapel. For example, Saddleback Church has one campus in Lake Forest, CA, but that campus currently has seven venues for adult worship.

**Worship service:** Christ-centered community that usually includes singing, praying, and preaching. It happens regularly, usually weekly. Also known as a celebration, service of divine worship, worship experience, and sometimes simply "church."

**Strategic partner:** At North Point Community Church in Atlanta, where this idea is most actively being pioneered, a strategic partner is a church that shares North Point's mission, strategy, values, and beliefs but remains a separate entity.

**Note:** In this book, a "multi-site church" is one that develops *worship* communities in multiple locations. Many churches sponsor off-site ministries (for example, helping out weekly at a local soup kitchen), but those alone do not create one church in many locations. Likewise, when we cite weekly worship-attendance numbers in this book, we mean the number of adults and children who participate in a worship service during a typical week, without counting anyone twice.

**Appendix B—Multi-Site Leadership Example Flowchart**



## *Appendix C*

### Interview Questions for WELS Pastors implementing form of Multi-Site Ministry

- In your perception, why would you say Evangelicals and Non-Denominational churches are having such great success, as far as numbers are concerned, by using a multi-site ministry model?
- Of those reasons, what do you think could be emulated/replicated in WELS circles? What should be avoided?
- Going from a single site church to a multi-site model, what changes have you seen?
  - In worship; outreach; education; leadership; fellowship, etc.
  - Any special programs/opportunities this model has opened up for your church?
- What was the impetus (observations, events) that led you to start implementing a multi-site model?
- What would you say is the biggest necessity for a multi-site model to be effective? (Location? Leadership? Outreach?)
- What are the biggest positives you've seen from implementing this model?
- What are the greatest difficulties/challenges of implementing this model?
- How has/did the leadership and membership of your congregation respond to this shift?
- Would you call the multi-site model an efficient/practical/effective model for wide range use in WELS? If so, why?
  - Or do you see this as more of a niche model that can be used in certain locations, but not in others? If so, why?
- What would you say is the biblical evidence that backs up/allows for this model of church planting?
- What didn't I ask that I should have?

## *Appendix D*

### Interview Questions for WELS Mission Counselors/Synod Leaders

- In your perception, why would you say Evangelicals and Non-Denominational churches are having such great success, as far as numbers are concerned, by using a multi-site ministry model?
- Any insight as to trends in the church/ people's expectations for churches which makes this model practical and productive?
- Any WELS locations that are using the multi-site model in whatever form in a very productive way?
- Perceived challenges/difficulties which might make this model hard to implement more often in WELS?
- Your perceived direction/development for future WELS church planting?
- Do you think that Multi-Site ministry is an effective, efficient, practical model of church planting in the WELS, or is it nothing more than a niche model?
- Recommendations on cities/areas/locations which might be a good fit to begin implementation of multi-site model?
- What didn't I ask that I should have?